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Old Noise, New Sounds: Sonic Explorations in Gallery Spaces¹

Su Ballard

People hated the sound (of [our] early films) and this encouraged [us] to challenge assumptions about technical perfection.
et al., 1991.²

It was left to Leon Narbey ... to set New Zealand art off to the kind of start the 'seventies should have. His light and sound environment Real Time, commissioned for the opening of the new Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, floated, swung, boomed, rang and flashed its way into a major event ... Real Time was in every sense an environment. ... Nothing on the scale of Real Time has been attempted here before. For that alone it must rate as a major achievement, but beyond that the environment does involve the participant. It needs people and it does involve them. ... Perhaps Leon Narbey's Real Time ... might be the lines along which the cultural battles of the next decade are to be fought.
Hamish Keith, 1970.³

Leon Narbey's electronic sound and light installation *Real Time* opened New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in February 1970. It was a noisy exhibition. Fluorescent and neon lights constructed flickering visual spaces, swathes of black polythene disguised all internal architecture, and recording microphones and movement triggers transferred sounds from one space to another. It was simultaneously disorientating and exhilarating. *Real Time* was a major installation in a minor location. Outside the centres of an already peripheral country, *Real Time* raised the possibility of networked electronic installation transgressing the mainstreams of both "gallery art and media art."⁴ It did this by using feedback and the relations of signal to noise to bring sound and image together in an interactive environment.

In the early twenty-first century, it is worth reflecting on Hamish Keith's invocation of cultural battles. Did Keith imagine that battle lines would demarcate old and new art? Or, was it that *Real Time* shifted previous delineations between sound and image? In *Real Time* sound and image emerged from unfamiliar materials that transformed the space and time of the gallery. As Narbey's use of electronic materials brought viewer experience to the fore, technologies within the gallery questioned the usual status of the viewer. *Real Time* heralded the emergence of complex relationships between informatic materials, sound, the viewer, and the spatial-temporal construct of an art gallery. The viewer was immersed in patterns of signal and noise, in clashing, clanging, flickering spaces.

In gallery environments it can simply be the sound of artworks that suggests a cultural battle. *Real Time* forced participants to listen in a space designed for viewing and as a result threatened long-established aesthetic modes. In the eighteenth century Gotthold Lessing argued for the separation of art into the distinct media disciplines of painting, music, poetry, sculpture and architecture. Once identified, these disciplines were expected to stick to what they did best, and not

1. This paper was supported by a research grant from Otago Polytechnic Dunedin.
2. Roger Horrocks, "Popular Productions," in *Pleasures and Dangers: Artists of the 90s*, ed. Trish Clark and Wylan Curnow (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1991), 159.
3. Hamish Keith, "Hamish Keith Reviews Current Exhibitions," *Arts and Community* 6, no.3 (March 1970), np.
4. See Diedrich Diederichsen, "Media Art Undone Panel," *Transmediale.07 Conference*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2007. http://www.mikro.in-berlin.de/wiki/tiki-index.php?page_ref_id=3

overlap. Because of the pervasive influence of this division—promoted in the Modernist rhetoric of Clement Greenberg—we learnt to bring to the art gallery sets of filters or frames that mark the artwork out from its architectural environment. As Brian O'Doherty explains: "unshadowed, white, clean, artificial—the [gallery] space is devoted to the technology of esthetics."⁵ This technology of aesthetics meant that to be able to focus on the artwork, a viewer was trained in aural and visual filtering. The silent white cube of the gallery allowed paintings to be hung in straight lines, framed, and self-contained. Furthermore, the gallery presented a blank space that constructed a particularly obedient viewing body. Artworks were afforded a silent contemplation. Neither the work nor the viewers made any noise. Over the course of the twentieth century, this same white cube began to transform into a black box as film and video fought for the viewer's attention. Curators began to work with these aesthetic dissonances, both visual and aural. Today, the apparent need for parabolic speakers and segregated viewing boxes implies that we are simply less skilled at isolating the senses of sound than vision. Due to modern gallery architecture's codes of control and containment the moving image does as a whole behave—but its sound leaks.

An early work by Popular Productions (an arm of the artists' collective et al.) played on these expectations, even as they were realised in the screening spaces of film. Echoing Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1964), Popular Productions screened minimal text over white leader accompanied by the sounds of a woman laughing. The repetitive looped sound of *Dora or Dora's Lunch or Dora Dora* (1990) mixed with a lack of visual clues proved to be excruciating for many audiences. We could not see what was causing such mirth. Was the film laughing at its viewers? In *Dora*, and many other early works, Popular Productions worked with the politics of image reproduction; questioning audiences' own desires as they found themselves before the screen. Films were made by combining VHS with televisual refilming, and reformatting early 16mm and 8mm footage; everything was seen as iterable and malleable. In *You Require Filmic Pleasure* (1987) Popular Productions imitated the hand scratching of a Len Lye film; except that the work was presented on VHS and lacked Lye's strict choreography. The viewer was left in a visually and sonically degraded zone where sound and image both frayed at the edges, leaving spaces for noise to creep in.⁶

It is the sound made by these artworks that continues to undo the disciplines of the gallery. Although Modernist media demarcations and disciplinary distinctions are now questionable, artworks in galleries are generally understood to be seen and not heard. They should be visual signal and definitely not aural noise. It is in these engagements with sound that digital materials have challenged the gallery. In 2004, this discomfort reached a high point with et al.'s *rapture* at the City Gallery, Wellington. The work produced intermittent high volume noise deemed inappropriate for a gallery environment. *rapture* generated significant public discussion on appropriate behaviours by both artworks and their creators.

This was, however, not a new challenge. Sound had always been present in gallery spaces. In 1902 Eric Satie admonished his audience to pay no attention to his *Musique D'Ameublement* or *Furniture Music*. Satie's concern was to:

...introduce music that satisfies the 'useful' needs ... Musique D'Ameublement generates vibrations; it has no other purpose; it performs the same role as light, warmth—and comfort in every form.⁷

5. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 15.
6. See Horrocks "Popular Productions," 158 – 162.
7. Quoted in Golo Follmer, "Audio Art," *Media Art Net*, ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2006. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art_audio/

Previous pages: Leon Narbey, *A Film of Real Time: A light sound environment*, 1970, 16mm film, colour, sound, 12 minutes, courtesy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, camera: Robert Hutchins.

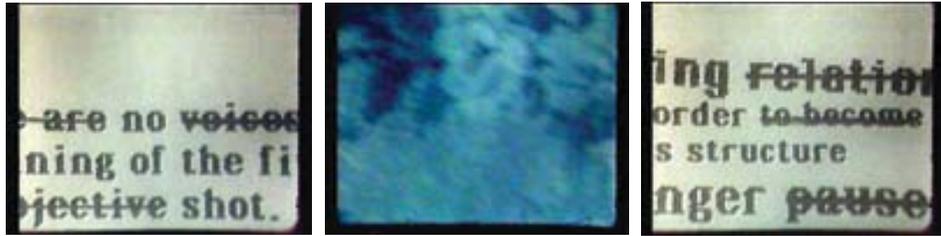


fig. 1



fig. 2

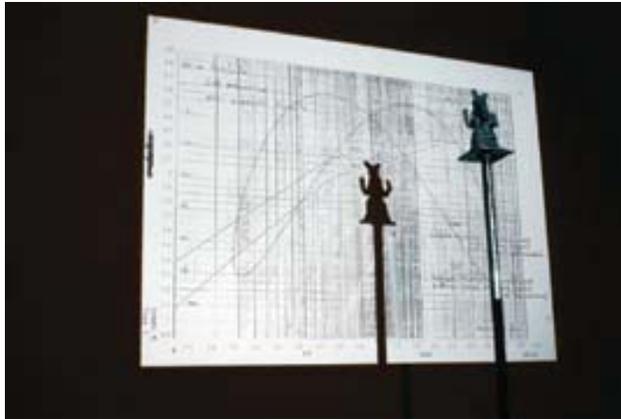


fig. 3



fig. 4

1: Popular Productions, *Dora's Lunch or Dora Dora Dora*, 1999, 10mm film.
 2: et al., *rapture*, 2004, mixed-media installation, sound, City Gallery Wellington.
 3: et al., *rupture*, photo: Gary Robinson.
 4: et al., *Maintenance of social solidarity—instance 5*, 2006, network-based multi-media installation, SCAPe Biennial, Christchurch Art Gallery, photo: Dean Mackenzie.

Satie was troubled by the worthiness of sound. Sound should be heard, it should produce ambience, but NOT be listened to. In *Furniture Music* Satie created a precursor for Muzak. It was the Italian Futurist noise machines that would soon demand attention and present a direct challenge to the primary visual experience of the gallery. In his 1913 text *The Art of Noises* Luigi Russolo declared the distinction between signal and noise to be untenable. Russolo, argued that the “machines, not simply their music, are the musical discourse.”⁸ For Russolo, inspired by affective experiences of noise in battle, it was noise that marked the arrival of the sound machine into visual gallery spaces. In retrospect, and somewhat ironically (given the Fascist context within which he was operating) Russolo introduced a consideration of the body and its relation to both sound and time.

The modern gallery had been designed as a timeless space, an eternal present within which the artworks could float independent of context. However, in the twentieth century, the body of the viewer became mobilised. For Michael Fried the full horror of this shift was realised in the theatricality of Minimalism: art that relied on the presence of the viewer to give it meaning. This acknowledgement of the viewer’s body moving through space challenged what could occur within the gallery. Time and space were no longer static but in motion.

The issue was not only being raised within the cross-over spaces of galleries, but within the mainstreams of Western music. Resonance, tone, timbre, frequency, vibration, amplification, and modulation are the material of sound, combinations of which become subsequently classified into music or noise. Within musical discourse sound was traditionally defined as what was heard and understood or deemed meaningful: it was signal.⁹ This meant that ‘noise’ was not seen as a discrete signal nor even marked a disturbance to signal but was understood to be signal’s opposite—indiscrete and non-periodic. In 1929 composer Henry Cowell began to question this distinction and defined noise as something embedded within sound.¹⁰ Speaking in 1937, John Cage introduced noise back into the realm of sound, famously declaring that:

*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.*¹¹

Cage defined noise as incidental, unheard, chance elements. In suggesting that we could derive meaning and fascination from noise, Cage removed any oppositions between noise, sound and music.¹² In part due to Cage’s influence, it is this concept of noise that dominates contemporary media contexts where sound, noise and image are made to work together by artists who question and elaborate art in the age of the digital.

listening and looking

So, despite having celebrated Narbey’s installation thirty years earlier, the mainstream media in New Zealand reacted to et al.’s infiltration of sound into a public art space with horror and uncertainty. And it is here that the media distinctions between what is heard and what is seen became blurred. A little background is necessary.¹³ In 2004 et al. was awarded both the prestigious Walters Prize, and a role as New Zealand’s representative at the Venice Biennale. Controversy erupted when it was falsely reported that *rapture* would be travelling to Venice. The work was at the time on show at the City Gallery, Wellington, described as

8. Mary Russo and Daniel Warner, “Rough Music, Futurism, and Postpunk Industrial Noise Bands,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 51.
 9. Among others Henry Cowell and John Cage resisted a history where noise had been “essential to [music’s] existence, but impolite to mention.” Henry Cowell, “The Joys of Noise,” (1929) in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 22 – 24. See also John Cage, *Silence. Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); and John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968).
 10. Cowell, “The Joys of Noise,” 22 – 24.
 11. John Cage, “The Future of Music: Credo,” in *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 3. Cage’s composition 4’33” (1952) required pianist David Tudor to sit before the piano and at precisely scored moments open and close the piano lid to signify three movements. The audience was made intimately aware of the sounds and noises of the auditorium. This work was later revisited by La Monte Young in his *Piano Piece for David Tudor No. 2* (1960). Young shifted the focus further toward silence by requiring Tudor to perform exactly the same opening and closing action as Cage’s piece, but without making a single sound. Young’s piece is complete when Tudor succeeds at performing the action. Although the audience may hear the same piece in these two works, they will see something altogether different. See Simon Shaw-Miller, *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 2002), 5 – 6.
 12. See essays by Christian Marclay, Yasunao Tone and David Toop in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, (New York and London: Continuum, 2004).

“the donkey in the dunny” by powerful talkback media presenter Paul Holmes. Talkback radio, newspapers and television were taken over with discussion of the validity of the work, the reticence of the artists to even name themselves, and the fact that this work would represent New Zealand internationally. The controversy made it into parliament and ministerial enquiries were held.¹⁴ The issue was not necessarily over the imagery of the work, as New Zealand art audiences were familiar with the flat grey tones of et al.’s installations and previous works that had included delicate graphing of sonic movements, experimental film splicing, and ‘blonding’ of familiar objects. The problem was in part with the noises the installation emitted.

rapture (2004) is an installation of a old grey steel portable toilet shed, raised on the deck of a mobile gallery trolley. The shed (described by et al. as an Autonomous Purification Unit or A.P.U.) remained on the trolley to be wheeled into in the middle of a small square alcove, as if it was in the process of being installed. Projected on the back wall of the alcove is a graph charting some unexplained experiment, plotting what might be flows of energy. Propped in front of this, casting its shadow over the projection, is a small figurine, evoking some totem or pagan offering. Periodically the wood and steel construction erupts, emitting noises that shake its foundations. The sound is shocking, especially if a viewer is close by. Was this kind of sound appropriate to a gallery installation representing New Zealand internationally? Was it what ‘we’ wanted others to ‘see’ of ‘us’? It was not revealed in the media that the sounds emitting from the closed shed, causing it to shake so uncontrollably, were recordings made of French underground nuclear tests at Mururoa Atoll.

The question raised by the work is one of the meaning of noise. What does it mean to listen to such unbearable noise—the hidden sounds of an atomic rapture? In attempting to find meaning within these unexplained sounds and forms, the media generated a debate which sidestepped the work itself.

Sound (and in particular an aesthetics of noise introduced to the gallery) has the potential to transform what viewing might be. Is listening in galleries a process of supplementing the visual, or do sonic and visual media come together? Do we see with more than our eyes? Physicists will tell you that sound is vibration, movement and pressure. Sounds, like radio waves, move through and across objects and architectural spaces. Sound, unlike light, is dependant on matter, it penetrates our bodies more deeply than visible light can. In order to hear these sounds we continue to follow Edison’s lead and construct listening technologies.

r a d i o q u a l i a is a collaboration between diasporic New Zealanders Adam Hyde and Honor Harger. *r a d i o q u a l i a* have developed tools for the capture and transmission of radio that also disrupt material delineations of sound and wave:

r a d i o q u a l i a think of large radio telescopes as radio receivers... Unlike normal transistor radios, these receivers are listening to signals being transmitted from planets and stars. Radio Astronomy connects broadcast radio—the transmission of audible information—and the science of radio astronomy—the observation and analysis of radiation from astrophysical objects.¹⁵

The sound work *data_space_return* (2003) is an extract from *r a d i o q u a l i a*’s research into radio astronomy at the VIRAC Telescope in Latvia, and in essence

is the result of holding a butterfly net up to distant radio waves. In outer space, noise is an all-pervasive signal; radio waves bounce between objects more distant than we can ever hear or see unaided. But these signals need to be gathered and energetically transformed in order to be heard. The sonification of the radio waves recorded in *data_space_return* makes listeners focus on what can be captured, and what we choose to capture, of the vast spaces and noises of the universe. When shown at The Physics Room, Christchurch, in 2003 the sounds of *data_space_return* were housed in a small white cubicle with headphones.¹⁶ Inside, viewers tuned into a pre-recorded transmission of lunar static that felt and sounded like Modern composer Edgard Varèse’s dream of “blocks of sound moving at different angles.”¹⁷ These collisions of sound masses were the result of *r a d i o q u a l i a*’s editing of satellite transmissions received through the radio astronomy dish. Focusing on the glitches, static and sound shadows of passing satellites and planets, *r a d i o q u a l i a* realised the noisy spaces of silence in-between communication. Nonetheless, despite its distant origins, the recording is immediately recognisable because, since the day in 1969 when Armstrong sent back his static message from the moon, we know the sound of silence in outer space.¹⁸ Neither empty nor void, the glitch and buzz is familiar. It maps both time and distance. The gallery listener to *data_space_return* relies entirely on the locative effects of sound as the noises echo from deep space. There is nothing to see.

glitch

The presentation of noise as a kind of mapping of technology is taken up by Stella Brennan’s *ZenDV* (2002), a tribute to and digital update of Nam June Paik’s iconic works *ZenTV* (1963 – 1975) and *Zen for Film* (1964 – 1965).

The first manifestation of *ZenTV* was part of the installation *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television* (1964). *ZenTV* was one of thirteen television experiments where Paik sought to “study the circuit, to try various ‘feedbacks’, to cut some places and feed the different waves there, to change the phase of waves.”¹⁹ The televisions were accompanied by four prepared pianos (one was further prepared when, at the exhibition opening, Joseph Beuys attacked it with an axe), and a variety of noise-making machines. Each television work was a different manipulation of the same three-hour nightly broadcast. The back of each set was open so that the audience could see what had been transformed inside. John Hanhardt describes these prepared televisions as Paik’s first “video sculptures” and many critics now herald it as the first video art exhibition.²⁰

In *ZenTV* a broadcast image has been compressed into one narrow line, appearing horizontally but viewed vertically (the TV is on its side). The line shrinks the screen’s image into one flickering strip of light on the surface of the monitor. In *Zen for Film* (1962 – 4) a 1000-foot film loop of clear leader is played through a projector.²¹ Scraping along the ground it slowly accumulates dust and scratches—material invasions of the film surface. Here the surface, rather than being compressed back into its medium is opened up to disturbances by other materialities.

What Brennan introduces to Paik’s series is the relationship of digital to analogue, and, like Paik, she makes us acutely aware of the specificities of the material through the particular noise the work contains within it or is generated

13. et al. is an artists’ collective. Over the past 20 years the collective have used numerous identities, some producing specific works. blanche readymade, for instance, did blonding works, coating objects in gluggy white paint. et al. encompasses all previous names within the collective (including merit grötting, marlene cubewell, lionel budd, l. budd, lillian budd, and p. mule). et al. suggests a positioning of artistic identity outside the cultural object he or she might create and critiques the notion of individual genius as the source of creative practice. These multiple, collective identities and the artists’ refusal to speak publicly has caused controversy in mainstream media. See also Jim Barr and Mary Barr, “l. budd et al.,” in *Toi Toti Toti: Three Generations of Artists from New Zealand*, ed. Rene Block (Kassel: Museum Fridericianum, 1999), 123.

14. This was misreporting, as the work for Venice was a new commission: *the fundamental practice*. See John Daly-Peoples, “Urban Myths and the et al. Legend,” *National Business Review* (20 August 2004), np; Anonymous, “Complaints under Section 8(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 1989,” *Broadcasting Standards Authority*, Wellington, 2004. <http://www.bsa.govt.nz/decisions/2004/2004-153.htm>. Jeremy Hansen, “et al. Field Story,” *Frontseat* [broadcast] Television New Zealand 4 July 2004. <http://frontseat.co.nz/exclusive/transcripts/transcript.php?id=9>

15. See *r a d i o q u a l i a*, “Broadcasting Sounds from Space,” 2004. <http://www.radio-astronomy.net/ars.htm>

16. *data_space_return* was shown in *Audible: New Frontiers*, curated by Sally McIntyre for The Physics Room, Christchurch.

17. Quoted in Cox and Warner, “Introduction,” *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, 5.

18. Daniel Rosenberg suggests that the sounds of outer space can be rendered so familiar that it is possible that “the power of our shared auditory memory of this event might not rely more on the dense drama of the sonic background than on the thin surface of language in which it is clothed.” Daniel Rosenberg, “One Small Step for—Nina Katchadourian—Sound Recording Review,” *Art Journal*, September (Fall 2002): 32 – 39.

19. Nam June Paik, *Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television* (Wuppertal: Galerie Parnass, 1963) reprinted at *Media Art Net*, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/31/>

20. John Hanhardt and Jon Ippolito, eds. *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 93. See also John Hanhardt, “Paik’s Video Sculpture,” in *Nam June Paik*, ed. John Hanhardt (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, W. W. Norton, 1982), 91 – 100.

21. *Zen for Film* was one of Paik’s first works produced after his move to New York to join with Fluxus activities.



fig. 4

4: Stella Brennan, *ZenDV*: *Bluescreen and Bars and Tone*, 2002, two-channel DVD, 3 minutes.

through its signals. In *ZenDV* two video monitors sit on plinths side by side. They each play test signals. One monitor shows the default blue screen, a reference colour telling us that 'no signal' is coming into the system and is accompanied by a sound reminiscent of a diamond stylus scratching at the end of a vinyl recording. The other shows colour bars (white, yellow, cyan, green, magenta, red, blue) and plays the tone (usually for digital media this is 1kHz) used to calibrate playback equipment. Every screen, monitor and projector represents its colour differently; colour bars allow a mapping of the intended colour of a work to the actual colours of the screen. The calibration tone allows us to listen for any variation in the tonality of equipment. An oscillation or variation in the tone means the speed of playback is not exact.

The digital matter of *ZenDV* evokes noise, both visual and sonic. When a film is played or processed the scratches on its surface appear either black or white, depending on whether they are caused pre-exposure by dust within the camera, or post-exposure within the film bath or projection environment. With video tape, scratches are generally caused by the playback mechanism or by a physical stretching of the tape surface. Scratches or noise on the surface of digital video can render information mute or invisible. On the other hand, the digital scratches used by Brennan are constructed via pre-set digital filters. When applied within digital editing software, dust, scratch and flicker are the realisation of a series of codes that suggest an approximation of analogue effects. They are renditions of other images—of dust, scratches and light flicker—and not distortion in themselves.

In *ZenTV* the flattening of the image into the screen's surface compresses all distinctions between information and noise. With *Zen for Film* the glitches are from dust, dirt, lines, scratches, things *added* to the surface; this is a potentially infinite process. Whereas the force of film through a projector is additive, the effect of digital interference on a surface is *subtractive*. If subjected to actual physical interference *ZenDV* will lose information. Over time the work may be rendered inoperable due to the discrete process of digital breakdown. The analogue tolerance of stretch is absent. In order for both sound and image to loop and 'pick up' dirt they need to be materially separate. This is what Brennan does with her two monitors.

remediation

The cultural battle of sound and image no longer seems quite so intense when it is formed within these digital spaces. A reason for this might be the way in which new media appear to constantly rework earlier media. Nathan Pohio's *Du Sauvage* (2003) explicitly employs remediation as a tool. Pohio's referents are the seminal moments of moving image as realised through the Hollywood blockbuster, and his work highlights the inadequacies of mapping ourselves onto these frameworks. Across three installation screens, Pohio performs the Wookiee, a character reflective of a generation whose first blockbuster experience was the overwhelmingly mystical release of George Lucas's *Starwars* (1977). Oversized and cumbersome, the shaggy companion figure of Chewbacca never quite fitted in the human-sized filmic environments. Pohio's repeated attempts at Wookiee portraiture highlight the disabling effects of the media culture that brought us the figure in the first place. On a small VHS monitor the artist is seen



fig. 5



fig. 6

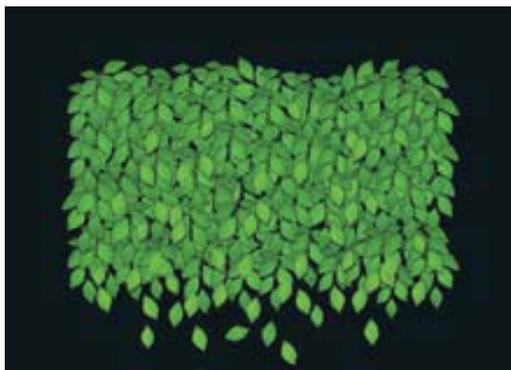


fig. 7

dressed in a Wookiee costume, rotating as if under anthropological examination. The figure spins as if aware of the gaze of the other (like a side-show freak). A DVD screen projection shows Pohio again in full fur, slowly fumbling his way through a jigsaw puzzle of Han Solo and Chewbacca (a kind of self-portrait). In a torturous act of stop-motion animation, we watch the pieces of the jigsaw appearing and slowly filling empty white spaces (the whole sequence takes 25 minutes). The empty jigsaw spaces mimic a gappy pixellated image. On the back wall is a portrait of Chewbacca rendered in white pastel on an oversized sheet of cardboard boxing.

Du Sauvage presents a self-contained performative space. The installation displaces the big-screen projection now expected from video works, the video image almost seems to be sliding off the wall. The monitor appears half-forgotten and easy to trip over. In his triple remediation of the screen, Pohio shows that the digital screen not as a cinematic window onto a world, but “windowed” itself, “with [additional] windows that open on to other representations or other media.”²² The windowed screen is our familiar interface with the digital. *Du Sauvage* is a remediation of the production and reception surfaces of both cinema and installation. Within the structure of the cinematic apparatus the screen was “the unseen frame for a perceived ‘stable’ world.”²³ In *Du Sauvage* the mediation of the screen introduces instability rather than an expected linear progression through newer media. This instability even begins to infect the installation’s analogue image as the white oil crayon slips around on the surface of the corrugated card. In a parodic invocation of the space where the third screen of the immersive environment should be, we find a dodgy material substitute. Crayon on card has been subsumed into (and remediates) the messy logic of the digital.

information

In 1946 Claude Shannon wrote a mathematical formula that mapped out the channels of information transmission.²⁴ In his formulation noise was not the opposite of information but an interruption that added unwanted information to the transmitted signal. Noise for Shannon was a material intermediary, a shifting signifier of both the unwanted and the repressed. There is no noiseless received sound, no noiseless received information, and the implication is that there is no pure *sent* sound or information (from outer space or otherwise).

The imbrications of information and noise is manifest in et al.’s *maintenance of social solidarity—instance 5* (2006). The installation occupies a small alcove that is partially blocked by a military-style portable table stacked with newspapers. Inside the space are an audience of three grey wooden chairs, some headphones and a modified data projection of Google Earth. It is not immediately clear if the viewer is allowed within the alcove to listen to the headphones. Monotonous voices spill from the space intoning political, social and religious platitudes. It is as if multiple messages have been sent, but their source, channel and transmitter are unintelligible to the receiver. All that is left is information divorced from meaning. On screen, and apparently integral to the Google Earth imagery, are five animated and imposing black monoliths. Because of their connection to the voices in the headphones, the monoliths seem to map the imposition of narrative, power and force on the landscape. Like their sudden

22. J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), 34.
 23. Andrew Murphie, “Putting the Virtual Back into VR,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 191.
 24. Claude Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” in *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27, (reprinted with corrections July, October 1948) Bell Labs, <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/paper.html>

5: Nathan Pohio, *Du Sauvage*, 2003, video projection, VHS monitor, olistick and card.
 6: Kentaro Yamada, *Tanpopo*, 2005, interactive installation.
 7: Aaron and Hannah Bechre, *Hedge*, 2003, interactive installation.

arrival in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) it is the visibility and improbability of the monoliths that renders them believable. In the video landscape the monoliths apparently house the dispassionate voices of many authorities. Their unearthly presence modulates the layering of political and media forces. And despite the best efforts of the information controllers "error as a matter of normal operation and not solely ... as an accident attributable to some definite breakdown, nevertheless creeps in."²⁵

Error creeps in. Error is the noise that concerned Shannon the most. In the *maintenance of social solidarity-instance 5* gaps are left for viewers to introduce misreadings of scale, space and apprehension. To don the headphones and occupy one of the soulless grey chairs is to occupy a relationship to power, power in a constant state of flux. The sound of the installation draws the viewer into its open, yet also somehow impenetrable system.²⁶ Although mapping these forces, the work does not locate them. et al. demonstrates the impossibility of information without noise.

feedback

Since the cybernetic dreams of the 1950s, feedback has been central to anything that might be considered digital. When cybernetics moved into art practice audiences were offered new tools to interact physically with the artworks. Viewers experienced a direct feedback loop, a haptic engagement and the instant pleasure of our actions impacting on the work. Often, though, the result was disappointing, emerging from constrained notions of human-computer interaction.²⁷ Within the gallery, a button was pushed and something happened, it was pushed again, and again, something happened. The experience was as controlled and sterile as the white cube. Some exceptions emerged.

Kentaro Yamada's *Tampopo* (2005) harnesses feedback, pulling together sound, movement and image. A microphone stands in front of a human-sized projection of a three-dimensional rendered dandelion. As the viewer blows into this microphone, the seeds of the dandelion scatter. The sound of breath is amplified and depending on the volume and distance of the viewer from the microphone the seeds can scatter across the whole wall. The direct responsiveness of this work shares much with Aaron and Hannah Beehre's *Hedge* (2003). *Hedge* responds to viewers' footsteps across the gallery floor. The sound of footsteps causes leaves to fall from a large digitally rendered projection of a hedge. As they fall they are immediately replaced, generating a loop of action, reminiscent of a screen saver.

In both these works there is a sense that feedback is one way; the performance is based entirely on received information. After each interaction, the dandelion returns to a rest (whole) position and no matter how many leaves drop from the hedge they are instantly replaced. Feedback in both works is a maintenance device balancing the noise or interventions of the viewer by equilibrating the system. Operating like a thermostat the works' negative feedback systems measure and compensate for random changes in the environment. Because its function is one of balance (or stabilisation), negative feedback keeps all parts of a system in play.

25. John von Neumann, "The General and Logical Theory of Automata," in *Collected Works*, ed. A. H. Taub (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1963), 294.

26. This argument parallels Sean Cubitt's statement "We are media: we are not endpoints, or conduits for it." Sean Cubitt, "New Light: Fragments and Responsibilities," paper presented at *Transforming Aesthetics*, AAANZ Conference, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 9 July 2005.

27. See the discussion of users and useability in Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media and Cultures* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2000).

Feedback is also a tool to generate resonance. In *Sonic Pixel and the Blockbuster* (2007) Alex Monteith reworked the closing fifteen minutes of the top fifteen highest grossing blockbuster movies of the twentieth century. Split between two screens, the left hand rolls films up to 1956, and the right hand, films from 1956 to the present. All thirty films play simultaneously, layered on top of one another. Moiré patterns emerge. First we catch some information: a title, scraps of images, a name repeated. The signal is so densely overlaid that it is only through the repetition of visual clues that it is possible to extract any specific information. More often than not it is the difference between the two sides of the screen that dominates. Until the 1950s cinema was dominantly a visual medium. The end of a film was an opportunity for the story to round itself out as key narrative elements played out in the final moments and the audience lingered in the theatre for the concluding title: 'the end'. But after the 1950s things changed. Television meant that movies had new competition, blockbusters had to change their mode of address. By the last moments of a film there is no longer a narrative to be completed, but a story of production to be told. The final ten minutes of a late twentieth century blockbuster meticulously detail the industrial and cultural resources that have created the event just viewed. And of course, most people have left the theatre by the time these endless credits roll. In Monteith's hands, and layered one over the other, these credits become visual noise; occasionally through the flickering lines a name repeats. A vast and complex industry is reduced to this noisy wonder of rolling credit lines. The screening of the work was accompanied by live sound produced by Sean Kerr via image processing technology, and an ambient soundtrack by Clinton Watkins. Kerr used a mobile camera pointed at the screens to trigger live sound samples sliced from the first fifteen seconds of the fifteen films 'blockbusting' prior to 1956, generating sharp, attenuated sounds. Watkins worked with the final fifteen seconds of the 1956 – 2006 blockbusters, composing a sound piece that he then mixed live. Both artists used portable technologies to further remix the sound of the visual. The fluid movements of the sound highlighted the rigid repetitive patterning making up the visuals.

So does *Sonic Pixel and the Blockbuster* highlight an ongoing cultural battle where sound is free to roam, and the image remains curtailed by its formal framing? The works discussed here demonstrate the digital is always enfolded with the analogue. As Gilles Deleuze writes of the digital in contrast to the analogue, in the analogical realm, the:

...various placements or sites of confinement through which individuals pass are independent variables: we're supposed to start all over again each time. [Whereas in the digital] the various forms of control ... are inseparable variations, forming a system of varying geometry whose language is digital (though not necessarily binary).²⁸

The digital for Deleuze is a mode of control; a technology in the Foucauldian sense: "the digital language of control is made up of codes indicating whether access to some information should be allowed or denied."²⁹ The analogical allows independent shifts and movements in variability. The digital also holds this potential, but when it is materialised within a system of control (in my examples,

28. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 1972 – 1990, ed. Lawrence Kritzman, trans. Martin Joughin (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1990), 178.

29. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 180.

a gallery) it sticks to its geometry and pattern. Control maintains a clarity of signal. Control gives us information. But these trends are neither purely digital nor the result of new sounds. They are old noises. Perhaps there is no battle at all.

old noises

*My film stuff is old brain stuff. It is nothing to the new brain and literature. It is to do with the body and kicking around.*³⁰

Len Lye's understanding of the "body and kicking around" was found in the old brain, that we might variously equate with intuition or the subconscious. The point for Lye was in a realisation of subjectivity, evident in *Free Radicals* (1958, reworked 1979) where direct scratching onto the film surface resulted in choreographed matter. In *Free Radicals* movements appear to shift off the surface of the film, outside the boundaries of the drawn object and into the room in which it is projected. Lye demonstrated that moving image was both about a form of uncontained motion, and a series of radiations whereby light moved matter. The key thing for Lye was that he was not looking at objects moving but, what he termed: the "pure figure of motion."³¹ For Lye divisions into material disciplines presented convenient but misleading formulas. He was not primarily interested in the material of film (which he removed by scratching to make light shine through the opaque surface), but in its apparent movement. His sculptures present similar boundary shifts, occupying uncertain architectures, becoming at once sound and motion. *Blade* (1965), for example, shudders, spins and kicks around to a pre-programmed, yet seemingly random, itinerary. Spinning on a mobilised base *Blade* operates through vibration, moving in a double sine-wave until it bursts uncontrollably into unpredictable motion, clanging against a suspended cork ball. This is visible noise. For Lye, art was part of an ongoing process that connected an old brain with a new brain and shifted established patterns of thought. Lye's reworking of media and discipline into collective motion suggests an avoidance strategy for any form of cultural battle.

In 2004 Sean Cubitt wrote to the Aotearoa Digital Arts list that "media mediate—they are physical and dimensional and informational structures of real materiality that communication embodies in."³² When these media are digital, when they get caught up in gallery spaces, and when they begin to make noises, even more happens. The avoidance of disciplinary boundaries begun by Lye now locates media to the fore. Lessing's divisions become redundant as time, motion and noise impact visual and sonic practices. For over a hundred years moving image has been a very real material. And like the first experiments in film, the works discussed here do not demonstrate a simplistic relationship of signal to noise. Rather, signal and noise are emergent from sound and image. Mediation is not simple, and in making use of the old noises of glitch, resonance and feedback these new media quietly make us aware of bad habits and entrenched positions, and begin to suggest new sounds.

8. Len Lye, *Free Radicals*, 1958 revised 1979, 4 minutes, 16 mm film, b&w, sound, courtesy the Len Lye Foundation, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth.
 9. Len Lye, *Blade*, 1959-1976, steel and cork hammer on Formica and wood base with motor, 28.90 x 18.00 x 18.00mm, courtesy the Len Lye Foundation, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
 10. Alex Monteth, *Sonic Pixel and the Blockbuster*, 2007, two-channel video, 15 minutes, 15 highest grossing films to 1956 (top), from 1956-2006 (bottom)



fig. 8



fig. 9



fig. 10

30. Wyan Curnow and Roger Horrocks eds. *Figures of Motion: Len Lye Selected Writings* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984), 86.
 31. Roger Horrocks, *Len Lye: A Biography* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001) 27.
 32. Sean Cubitt, "[Ada_List] Digits and Names." Aotearoa Digital Arts [discussion list], 18 July 2004. <http://www.aotearoadigitalarts.org>