

Silence or Circumspection in Chinese Sound Practices?

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Abstract

In this text I will be arguing for the significance of silence or circumspection as a form of active disengagement. In particular I will be looking at this as an artistic tactic, focusing on sound art or experimental music practices that display such tactics as a matter of choice or necessity. These forms of practice will be related to historically situated practices that have taken various approaches to avoid confrontation while nevertheless asserting their presence in relation to specific social issues. I will be proposing that such practices institute new relationships between an artist and their audience that may open up the potential for new social and political effects.

Keywords

Sound art, experimental music, pragmatism, withdrawal.

Introduction

My Background and the background to the talk

This talk draws on several strands of thinking and writing that I've been pursuing over the last few years. In the first place, the material that I will be dealing with draws on my MA dissertation, produced while I was at Goldsmiths College in London in 2014. More recently the previous talk I did here at the Beijing Inside-Out Art Museum last October developed these ideas in conjunction with the exhibition I curated here at the time. That talk was later expanded and an edited version was published by Randian magazine in April.

All of these texts and talks have reflected upon the research I have been doing on the history and role of sound art and experimental music in China. Up till now I have been undertaking this research on a freelance basis, but as of September I will be starting my PhD on this subject at the Hong Kong Baptist University with Dr. Anson Mak.

The subject of this particular talk, on the issues of silence and circumspection in relation to sound practices in China, develops from the above work. I will be addressing silence as an aural phenomenon—as the lack of audible sound—and as a sociological phenomenon – as a removal or withdrawal of the body from a situation. In the process I will address various examples of silences in cultural history, the practical and pragmatic uses of these silences within particular social situations, and the possibilities for change that they might embody.

MIJI Concerts

The specific inspiration for this text was a recent concert that took place in Beijing in March of this year. This was the MIJI Concert at the studio of poet and musician Yan Jun.

MIJI Concerts are a regular series of performance events held in Beijing and organized by various people related to the Subjam record label that Yan Jun founded in the 1990s. This series of concerts has happened semi-regularly—usually about once a month—since 2011, and the particular event I am concerned with here was its 53rd iteration. MIJI has been held in various spaces in Beijing over the years, but at the end of 2017 moved to a studio that Yan Jun set up in a residential apartment block in the area of Shilipu, just beyond the East 4th ring road.

[photo]

MIJI Concert 53

In MIJI Concert 53 four performances were presented. The first was a collection of five short pieces composed by Zhu Wenbo and performed by Zhao Cong. The final piece was a vocal work by Anzi. With due respect to these two performances, what I will talk about today are the two performances in between them, which were both highly restrained and apparently silent pieces.

The first was titled *Linear Duo (Essential Version or Fundamental Version)* composed by Yan Jun, and performed by Yan and Zhu Wenbo, and the second was an untitled piece composed by Kang He.

[photo]

For *Linear Duo*, Yan and Zhu sat on opposite sides of a table facing the audience. On the table between them was a double clock, of the type used for speed chess tournaments. Once the performance began either Yan or Zhu periodically pressed the button on the clock on their respective sides, and—as in a chess tournament—this click would apparently shift the role of performer from one person to the other, from one side of the table to the other, in a ping-pong fashion. The lengths of time that either Yan or Zhu maintained this role varied, and were determined by each performer according to their whim. However, beyond this pressing of the button, neither of them actually appeared to perform any particular actions or made any particular noises that might be categorized as ‘performed’. After 30 minutes the clocks reached the end of their two 15-minute cycles and the performance ended.

[photo]

Following *Linear Duo* was a much simpler piece by Kang He, titled *5 minutes of wet cloth*. Kang He was not actually present on the day, so the performance was set up by Yan Jun. In front of the audience a chair was placed, left there for five minutes in silence, and then the performance ended. The title suggests that Kang felt the audience would sweat a lot while experiencing a feeling of boredom. (Yan, 2018a)

Here were two performances that in their different ways enforced a period of contemplation on the part of the audience (and on the part of the performers where they were present). My own “contemplation” involved a certain amount of self-awareness, boredom, frustration, and at the same time a questioning about the meaning of these apparent non-events.

Of course there have been many performances in which little happens. Going to performances that involve sitting uneasily in a room with ‘nothing’ happening has become almost a cliché of experimental or “art” performances. But—of course—not all silences are silent, and not all non-events are uneventful. Inspired by the experience of these two performances what I would like to address today is how such apparently uneventful performance can still retain meaning. I will propose that they do this precisely because of the context in which they are proposed and presented. I am interested to investigate when such restraint and apparent lack productively create a space for meaning. I am also interested in whether a meaning inherent in such activities can tell us anything about the existing social conditions in which they occur?

Silence?

Firstly I need to explain what I mean by “silence” in this context. At first I may have made an assumption that these two performances were about silence itself. Not silence as a complete lack of transmitted sound though (as in a vacuum, for instance) but as a more general lack, in this case the removal of performance and spectacle, a silence that leaves the audience to contend with the situation in which they find themselves. This would be in contrast to the usual expectations of a performance where a situation occurs in which something is created that the audience observes or participates in. For a sound performance there would be an expectation of something to hear; for the visual arts, something to see.

However, when I wrote to Yan Jun and Zhu Wenbo by email after MIJI Concert 53 to ask about their performance I initially used this word “silence” in isolation, and it immediately became clear that this single word, without qualification, did not communicate the nuance I was intending: of a silence related not just to the audible but to a general act of the withdrawal of performance.

Naturally Yan Jun corrected my use of the word, and he used a particular adjective to describe this use of the word: “bourgeois”. I believe that in using this word, Yan was pointing out that such a conception of silence (in a sense) reveals something about the social background in which it used. If I had used the word silence in that way, it would have reflected a social background that positioned me as being capable, and privileged, to treat silence as autonomous from a context. Yan wrote that:

“[...] there is no silence at all: no unintended silence as Cage did in 4'33. Nor intended silence in post-Cage time. It's not for listening at all. But of course any work has its open aspects. All sounds and light and smell and mind are fine to be applied by audience themselves. [...] I'd say there is no silence in my work. There are blanks and voids, environment sound, small sounds, no sound, situations in-between, etc. ... but no silence. [Silence is] a very bourgeois concept, a notion of substantializing the unformed void.” (Yan, 2018b)

The “unintended silence” that Yan mentions, is a reference to John Cage’s realization that there was never any silence, because even without external aural stimuli for as long as we are alive the body

produces its own sounds that we cannot help but hear on some level. As sound art scholar Katsushi Nakagawa summarizes, following Cage's famous visit to the anechoic chamber at Harvard University:

"[...] Cage decided that there is never silence in any situation, and re-defined silence as sounds 'which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention' (Cage, 2011, pp. 22–23). That is, Cage redefined silence as 'unintended sound.'" (Nakagawa, 2010, p. 43)

Theoretically, the only true silence that is possible is, as John Cage himself suggests, "the silence of death" (Barrett, 2016, p. 24), or as Jacques Attali puts it we must not forget that, "life is full of noise and that death alone is silent". (Attali, 1985, p. 3)

Zhang Liming, 'Plug'

Despite my inaccurate terminology, I actually agree with Yan's interpretation of the place of silence. My interpretation is that there is no silence and there are no silent pieces separate from the context within which they are presented. My use of the word "silence" already implies an audible context within which "silence" is suggested. Although the word may insinuate this, silence never exists such that it can be understood as a separate entity.

To take another example of an apparently formal silence that can in fact never be divorced from its context, there is the piece that I introduced in my talk here last year: Zhang Liming's 'Plug' (2009). In that talk I introduced my theme by playing a series of four, related recordings by Zhang Liming, from his 2009 release *A Gift of Despair for My Friends*. The first of these recordings was called 'Plug'. 'Plug' is 6 seconds of silence (or as Yan Jun has suggested, not silence but "current noise through the plug" (Yan, 2018a)). The whole series of works are titled 'Plug', 'Plug & Finger', 'Plug, Finger & Radio', 'Plug, Finger, Radio & Software', and these titles seem to be telling us that there is a progression in terms of the technologies being used to create the sound. The first piece, 'Plug', seems to involve the exposing of a bare audio plug, but we can only understand this by listening to the other three pieces that progressively add interactions with that bare plug and the manipulation of the signal that arises from those interactions.

In one sense, this set of pieces is a formal demonstration of an artist's practice: we hear his activity neatly divided into the four pieces. In another reading of the work, especially when the four pieces are taken as a set, they go beyond the formal and tell us something about the activity of an artist in a particular situation. In this way seemingly simple works can transcend themselves and introduce aspects of the world beyond their formal appearance.

So it would be a mistake to think that 'Plug' was in fact silent, because it is about the idea of silence in relation to sound. In itself it sits in the context of the other three pieces and its meaning is based on that arrangement. The temptation to think it separately, and hence to think of silence as decontextualized is partly a problem of the process and institutions of sound recording that transpose it from context to another (for instance, the division of a recording into discrete "tracks"). That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it must be taken into account when we try and interpret the sound.

What is this "silence"?

Following Yan Jun, silence is not limited to the sonic or inaudible. It is certainly a way of understanding those, but it can also be applied as an understanding of performances of lack, withdrawal, or inertia in a world and society that favours, and even demands the opposite. In that way "silence" becomes a tactical proposal within a context and activity, be that art-related or otherwise.

About silence

So what of other 'silences'? There has been much written about silence, as well as instances and uses of silence within certain artist's practices, some of which have become almost exemplary, becoming part of a mythology of sound.

I will outline some examples of the performance of silence, and formulate some thoughts about the significances of these performances, the reason why artists adopt this mode, and the potential results of its use.

The arrogance of interpretation

Before going too far though, I should take a step back and examine my own actions by asking what I am doing when I seek out such "significant" performances? In my desire to find broader meanings for these works, am I guilty of what Susan Sontag called, "the arrogance of interpretation"? (Sontag, 2009, p. 8) In Sontag's 1964 essay 'Against Interpretation', written as Conceptual Art was turning art away from

objectivity, she calls for a renewed attention to form over content in the analysis of art. To generalise from this, such a concern is a recurring theme of art criticism, and indeed of our everyday experience of the world. Do we take things at face value or based on our reading of them?

Applied to considerations of sound and sound art these questions become: should we hone our senses to heighten the moment-by-moment experience of a performance and draw our meaning entirely from that? Or is it reasonable to move beyond the event and place it into context, drawing on the fact of the event within a particular situation as informing the appearance, but not being limited to that? This is a particular issue in a social environment that does not support such activities. In certain senses this is the environment in China.

Our own capability, as the audience, to make such interpretations, is distinct from the intentions and expectations of the artist. I suspect that many of the artists involved would scoff at or be wary of such attempts to interpret their works as being overly significant within a social or political context. Such an interpretation may do a disservice to the silences I am considering by collapsing their possible meanings into another cliché of what a performance 'should' do. And if a performance is perceived as a cliché, it no longer encourages critical thinking about itself. That lack of critical thought may leave it open to being co-opted for purposes other than those for which it was originally conceived – it becomes something akin to propaganda. It seems to me that the performance must step back from cliché, and from such deliberate or coincidental instrumentalizations (whether performed by the artist, the audience, or other powers). Somehow the act must remain in a pre-existing state where meaning is retained as a "possible", and not collapsed into a "reality".

Returning to the consideration of the MIJI concert, and based on my conversations and knowledge of the artists and their works, I believe that neither Yan Jun, Zhu Wenbo, nor Kang He would be interested in interpretations of their performances as primarily politically motivated.

When I asked him about his understanding of *Linear Duo*, Zhu Wenbo simply reflected on its connections to improvised music:

"That day's performance could be [...] just to decide when to press the button [...] I must have some reasons to do just a simple thing (press the button), but I can't see it very clear[ly]. For me, 'improvisation music' has [the] same feeling." (Zhu, 2018)

Yan Jun provided some further background to his choice of the chess timer. He chose this particular machinery as a way to emphasize the aspect of time involved in the process over and above activity, but (in a similar way to Zhu) he connects it with improvised music:

"I started to use this chess timer two years ago, from a feeling of being bored by most improvised music, which are about virtuosity based on several models. One of these fundamental [models] is conversation – musically and politically I'm not interested to do this. So I designed a different way of duo collaboration.

And it's a nice way to have percept[ion] of time in this ongoing music[al] structure.

With Zhu Wenbo we did this fundamental version that only has one element: time. [During the performance] we have to decide how long each section is, according to the ongoing process, and especially the challenges made by the other player. It's improvised music." (Yan, 2018b)

And, although I have not been able to speak directly to Kang He about his piece, when I asked him (through Yan Jun) if he could give me some more information about it, Yan reported back that, "he said 'no' to my question"! (Yan, 2018c)

From my own point of view I certainly do not want to spuriously ascribe irrelevant motivations to an artist, and I understand that not all works need to be understood as political, and given the situation artists in China are working within it is often unwise to pursue such an interpretation. It is nevertheless my belief that all practices hold significance beyond their own space of presentation. From this I believe that they all take part in a political environment at some level. Even a denial of extended meaning for these practices is in itself political. Such a denial, or lack, or withdrawal, or silence, represents a way to exist in what may be perceived to be an unwelcoming world. As Adel Wang Jing has said:

"Most sound practitioners, however (especially those from the Mainland), consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from political discourse and avoid using sensitive terms [...]" (Wang, 2015a, p. 73)

But she goes on to qualify this by saying:

“We should not hastily conclude that Chinese sound artists, especially those of younger generations, are apolitical simply because they have told the public media that they are not interested in politics. The fact is that the game of political resistance is changing and becoming multiscalar as technical and intellectual milieus change.” (Wang, 2015a, p. 74)

The significance of “silence”

So, to return to the examples of what I would call significant silences, silences that have some kind of effect in the world, I want here to very briefly outline the following three examples: the first being that of John Cage; the second, the silences central to the practices of the advocacy group ACT-UP and later the art collective Ultra-red; and lastly, the silence from which the *Onkyo* musical genre developed.

John Cage

Jonathan D. Katz, G Douglas Barrett, and Douglas Kahn all address Cage’s relationship to silence in detail, so I draw on their writings here. While Cage is often presented as the purveyor of significant silence *par excellence*—mainly in relation to his piece *4’33”* and the anecdote of his time spent in the anechoic chamber mentioned above—his relationship with silence is nevertheless complex and problematic. Barrett refers back to Katz’s writing to position Cage’s silences as responding to social conditions of the 1950s when the pieces were created, specifically in relation to the suppression of homosexuality. He positions Cage’s silences as positive in the sense that they do not merely fall into nihilism:

“As a historically specific mode of queer resistance during McCarthyism, ‘this is not silence at all,’ but rather ‘the *performance* of silence’; with silent music, Katz argues, Cage performed a ‘statement of nonstatement.’”

Barrett continues:

“[...] silence needs the context of music for its effect. Perhaps nowhere more explicitly than in music does silence *negate* a mandate to make sound. It is then through this negational act of silence—precisely *in music*—that Cage’s work acquires its genuine socio-political force. Reading Debord alongside Mouffe’s conception of critical art, Cage’s silence, despite the broader failure of indeterminacy, may be understood as a kind of proto-critical music. ‘Critical of itself in its very form,’ through this situatedness as music, Cagean silence resisted the hegemony of the 1950s through the logic of negation.” (Barrett, 2016, pp. 34–35)

[This ‘Critical of itself in its very form’ is something that I dealt with in my lecture here last year, on the subject of criticality in general.]

As I said this can be understood as a positive reading of Cage’s silences. In contrast Douglas Kahn points out that Cage’s concerns with silence strip the situations in which those silences take place of their social significance:

“[...] I will examine Cagean sounds at the amplified threshold of their disappearance—silence, small and barely audible sounds—and how the social, political, poetic, and ecological aspects correspondingly disappear. [...] I will concentrate primarily on how his concept of sound failed to admit a requisite sociality by which a politics and poetics of sound could be elaborated within artistic practice or daily life.” (Kahn, 1997, p. 557)

“Cagean silence, we find, was dependent from the very beginning on silencing; this alone would run counter to the emancipatory rhetoric with which he is associated [...] Silencing would, in fact, run concurrently with his progressive opening up to all sound, and at the most fundamental level, it would entail a silencing of the social and ecological within an ever-expanding domain of music.” (Kahn, 2001, pp. 159–160)

Kahn’s argument is based on the idea that Cage was bringing all sounds under the remit of music, understood as an autonomous form that exists outside of a context:

“*4’33”* muted the performer to shift attention to the sounds in the surrounding space and by implication to environmental sounds in general, while the anechoic chamber muted the sounds of the surrounding space, cordoning off all environmental sounds and dampening sounds inside its waffled walls to shift attention to Cage’s internal bodily sounds and by implication to the impossibility of silence and the pervasiveness of music.” (Kahn, 2001, p. 191)

So Cage's attention to silence can lead to contradictory readings. As Jacques Attali highlights, Cage's opening up of music could serve as a form of enforced egalitarianism:

"When he sits motionless at the piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, letting the audience grow impatient and make noises, he is giving back the right to speak to people who do not want to have it." (Attali, 1985, p. 136)

Ultimately Cage's silence can be interpreted as an insufficient, if not oppressive, response to social conditions.

ACT UP/Ultra-Red

The advocacy organization ACT UP came to prominence in the 1980s through their direct address of the AIDS epidemic that was then largely being ignored by mainstream media and society, and where addressed was used to cast the gay community as scapegoat for the issue. Later the art collective Ultra-Red adopted ACT UP's iconic statement of "SILENCE = DEATH" in a series of performance works which intentionally placed it in conjunction with renditions of John Cage's *4'33"*. In this way Ultra-Red sought to criticize Cage's approach to sound and his silencing of context.

[photo]

This statement "Silence = Death" was just one of ACT UP's responses to society's deliberate disregard of AIDS and homophobia. Their work generally, this specific statement and its graphic presentation, as well as Ultra-Red's subsequent use of it, were designed to bring issues into a general state of visibility. But the choice of the word "Silence" shifts the attention from the visible to the realm of the audible. In this way, rather than simply reasserting the presence of the issue visually, the statement demands that the issue be dealt with as part of a discourse, a public discourse. In relation to Ultra Red, Barrett says:

"Silence figures here as both a symbolic marker of homophobia and [...] silence is reconstituted as a container for collective action." (Barrett, 2016, p. 11)

It is the incipient silencing of the issue and of those affected that amounts to homophobia. But it is this assertion of silence that also implicitly forms a collectivity that can then be mobilized.

Onkyo

In Japan in the 1990s extreme noise or an extreme lack of noise developed as discrete performance practices. Here I'm interested in the quieter end of the spectrum, what is known as *onkyō*. As Lorraine Plourde has explained:

"In Noise music the listener is assaulted by excessive volume, while in *onkyō*, which draws on often barely audible sounds and the silences between them, the listener is assaulted by the virtual absence of sound." (Plourde, 2008, p. 277)

Here I will provide two quotes that give some indication of the nature of these silences. The first by David Novak in which he discusses the material conditions of performance of such music, and the next by Plourde from a text titled "Disciplined Listening in Tokyo: *Onkyō* and Non-Intentional Sounds". Both these authors try to express what it is that *onkyō* requires from its audiences:

"The quietness of the space became a hallmark of *onkyō*'s performative silence, as well as the special kind of listening associated with the genre, as audiences came to Off Site prepared to listen with deep concentration." (Novak, 2010, p. 39)

"There is a thick atmosphere of uncertainty and perhaps unrest, as the audience's silence is intensified by its confrontation with a performance that is marked by minutiae, sparsity, and long spatial gaps." (Plourde, 2008, pp. 278–279)

Positive or Negative Silence?

As we have seen in the three "exemplary silences" that I outlined above, there are many levels on which such "silent" performances can be interpreted as being significant. But what is the significance of the MJI performances, and does this significance extend beyond the place of a performance and the small group that witnessed it? For these performances, at one level there is a direct engagement with the audience sitting there in the room. I am certain that all those present on the day were questioning the significance of performances that placed such demands on their patience and attention. Beyond that room, for those who weren't there, or those who have no interest in such events, the significance may simply be to confirm their assumptions or prejudices about so-called "experimental" performance art.

Therefore the performance of silence, as with any event, can have positive and negative intentions and reception. From a review of the existing literature on this subject, initially it seems difficult to find much writing that treats silence in a positive sense.

“Negative” Silence?

When I talked about John Cage above, I focused on the act of silencing that he enacts as related to an act of oppression. In the same way, Jacques Attali, firmly considers silence as such an act. In these cases silence retains this oppressive meaning by being used most often as a verb, rather than a noun: to silence. To silence is interpreted as a way to enforce certain restrictions and prevent action in society. Silence is imposed; silence, primarily, is a state in which noise is controlled, and this exertion of power over noise is inherently political. Attali specifically links the act of repression and the control of sound, when he highlights: “the political importance of cultural repression and noise control.” (Attali, 1985, p. 7)

But there is always some residual “noise” left over from this repression, and it might be said that this process of repression is not so much about reaching the point of no sound, of silence, as that of the exertion of power directing sound into acceptable forms. Christoph Migone points out that Attali makes clear that: “[...] the noise that results is in effect a silence without agency, a *silencing*.” (Migone, 2012, p. 208) To remove agency is to remove all possibility of acting critically in the world, and to remove a significant potential for change.

As I have already mentioned, the word ‘silence’ might be a convenient description for certain practices, but—as with Yan Jun’s reaction to my use of the word—it is deceptive in its historical and practical meanings. Practically speaking, what I am addressing is not silence itself. Nor is it a silencing of another, as might be the case with silencing as oppression. But I am actually interested in the body refraining from making its own sound. It is in this *choice*, I propose, that a potential can be developed, a process can be put into effect, and power can be subverted and agency developed. As LaBelle says in his book *Acoustic territories: sound culture and everyday life*:

“Silence runs both ways: it functions as power in the arsenal of law and order to pin the body down while also providing means to speak without saying a word—to remain silent, to take the oath of silence, to refuse to utter, all perform within a repertoire of resistance and criminality. To respond to the silencing of interrogation, of arrest, with their own form of silence, that of refusal, the prisoner seeks to withstand the pressure—to *keep one’s lips sealed*.” (LaBelle, 2010, p. 72)

More recently, in LaBelle’s new book *Sonic Agency*, he quotes Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen in relation to the various protest movements around the world that took the form of the occupation of public areas, and that eventually became linked to the Occupy movement, Rasmussen characterises these in this way:

“The lack of demands was precisely an attempt to produce a political space that precedes the daily political procedures whereby all places are always already distributed. It was not a question of taking power but of refusing and showing this refusal. In that sense the occupations were a kind of withdrawal that opened up a genuine political space characterized by a radical equality [...]” (Rasmussen, 2015, p. 72; LaBelle, 2018, p. 157)

Bartleby

This has parallels with another famous occupier, Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, The Scrivener*. Bartleby is a man who enters employment with a firm, but who develops the remarkable characteristic in that although he comes to work, he will not actually perform his duties. Nor, when confronted, will he provide a specific reason for his inactivity. But he is not silent; when he is asked to do his job, he asserts only that he “would prefer not to.” His employer, the narrator of the story, becomes unable to even remove him from the office, eventually resorting to desperate measures to resolve this crisis of immobility. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes on this story and its significance, particularly drawing on the Aristotelian “to not-be” in which all potential resides (Agamben, 1993, p. 34). But while this is an important part of my understanding of sound practices, I can only address this complex subject in passing in this particular essay.

Pragmatism

So the adoption of silence in its various forms is a way to reflect actual conditions in which activities take place. Such a move can manifest itself as a clear political commentary, as in the case of Cage or ACT UP. But politics works at all levels, and the level of daily living provides as much rich environments for significant activity, as demonstrated by the development of *onkyō*.

The practical limitations of spaces of performance in certain respects transcend cultural and national boundaries, forming sites where pragmatic concerns must be addressed that all artists must deal with.

While there is usually an object-based component to sounds, in its generation and dissemination, this is coupled with a non-objective component as sound travels. The latter component makes sound troublesome as it does not respect physical boundaries in the same way that visibility respects them. Sound travels through spaces and objects, it leaks. I would propose this leakage as a positive aspect of sound as it prevents it from being co-opted so easily into a commodity, ready to be absorbed by the art system, of instance. But how can artists balance the demands of sound to be heard, and the demands of society to be undisturbed? Various kinds of silence are solutions to this problem that I would propose can produce new forms of potentiality through sound.

This general pragmatism in relation to sound addressed in the development of *onkyō* in Japan has parallels with the development of certain types of sound practice in China. Although it is rare for these to become a central feature of a particular style of performance (as with *onkyō*), restrictions can lead to creative responses. All performance venues located in populated areas have such issues to deal with. I just wanted to talk at this point about some specific examples in Beijing.

fRUITYSPACE, a basement live house located near the centre of Beijing, must also keep its performances within acceptable noise levels, otherwise the restaurant upstairs will complain, with the threat of the local Public Security Bureau being called. fRUITYSPACE's response is a one of simply keeping the noise down.

Where a level of noise is demanded for performances, another approach is to shift the location in which that noise takes place. This can either be done physically by moving the performance out of situations that must remain quiet, or performing in that situation but routing the audible element of the performance out of harm's way.

In the latter case, in 2011 ShanAV Studio, founded by artist Sheng Jie (gogoj), hosted a series of workshops and performances in a residential apartment in the centre of Beijing. In order to maintain her relationship with her neighbours Sheng made it a feature of the often late-night performances that while they were performed in the apartment, the sound was not played audibly within that space, but was broadcast online. This is an example of the technological routing of noise out of harms way. (Sanderson, 2011)

The physical movement of the location of the performance is also a way of silencing one location so that noise can take place in another. The Raying Temple venue, established by the Nojiji collective, known for their preference for loud noise performances that take on a ritualistic and overwhelming nature, was located in a building far out in the suburbs of Beijing's Tongzhou district, in what was then a sparsely populated area where loud sound was not an issue. Since Raying Temple closed down in 2012 (not due to noise per se, but over their housing contract), Nojiji have struggled to find suitable venues to host their events. While this has been in some part due to the social problems of noise as disturbance, it is also due to Nojiji's members' reputations for blowing the speakers of whatever venue they find themselves in. (Wang, 2015b)

For these reasons performance events have occasionally moved from the formal music venues into urban, or suburban non-spaces or out into the countryside. Between 2009 and 2015, Zoomin' Nights was a weekly series of experimental music events organised by Zhu Wenbo, held in the now defunct live venues D22 and XP in Beijing.

[Photo]

Following the consecutive closures of these venues, Zhu moved out of such formal live venues and carried the event on in a pedestrian underpass near his home by the intersection of the 4th Ring Road and the Airport Expressway in Beijing. After Zhu terminated this series in 2016, Wang Ziheng, the musician and owner SOS Bar (also now closed), then adopted this location for his own series of free improvisation events.

Wang has more recently begun to organise more elaborate events, more like mini-festivals, held in caves and the mountainous areas on the periphery of Beijing. This move was inspired by experimental musicians Wei Wei and Li Jianhong's own environment improvisation concerts in 2015, that Wang had also taken part in.

These examples demonstrate how lived conditions affect the possibilities for sound production, and why silence (or at least quietness) may become an attractive or simply pragmatic option. The movement of the MIJI concerts to Yan Jun's apartment/studio can be seen as a continuation this.

Looking at the history of cultural production in China (and indeed elsewhere) it might even be said that such movements are a common practice. In terms of the recent history of the visual arts in China I can point to what art historian Gao Minglu designates as “Apartment Art” (*gongyu yishu*), a trend in art exhibition-making that developed in the 1990s. Gao coined this term to describe the artistic practices that withdrew from the officially sanctioned art spaces, and from the then mainstream styles of Political Pop and Cynical Realism that dominated the local and international understanding of avant-garde art in China at this time. Apartment Art involved the presentation of artworks in private residencies and spaces as an attempt to avoid destructive interactions with the unsupportive public situation. Gao recently wrote that Apartment Art took on an aspect of “silence”, which he claims represented the unique characteristics of this section of the Chinese avant-garde art of the time:

“The value of the works lay in their continuation of the spirit of the 1980s in the form of silence. They were not supported or funded by any private or government organizations, but were produced independently by artists who exhibited their works privately in apartments or houses. These artists did not make art for the market or for public exhibition. The low-key nature of Apartment Art was partly a response to the suppressed art ecology in China after 4 June 1989, and partly a self-questioning and criticizing of the purity of modernism itself.” (Gao, 2012, p. 212)

Acquiescence

It has been shown that Cage’s *4’33”* can be critically adopted under different times and circumstances by a group such as Ultra-red to address social issues that Cage himself deliberately avoided due to the social conditions he was living under. Such might be said to be a form of pragmatism. But if silence and/or withdrawal are understood in this way, they leave themselves open to the criticism that a practice’s lack of involvement in a particular physical or ideological situation may effectively amount to acquiescence to a dominating power.

In relation to artistic practices in China, art critic Robin Peckham has proposed that the artists must counter such a possibility by maintaining a critical awareness that they are always-already complicit with the system in which they have developed, as, “a position of criticality suggests that the artist has acknowledged that he or she is already a compromised component of a compromised system.”

He nevertheless recognises the bind that these artists must accept:

“Even if any critique launched via this social position can only be understood as at least partially ‘guilty’, criticality is certainly understood as preferable to the utopian or activist in its recognition of this system of social role-playing through the mechanisms of aesthetics.” (Peckham, 2012, pp. 252–253)

In relation to mass culture Zhang Xudong also sees this critical engagement through self-critique as an option for modern intellectuals in China generally, highlighting its “evasive and ambivalent” forms as practices holding a certain potential:

“Facing the bustling secular world of consumption, the hegemony of mass culture, and a popular nationalist sentiment, the ‘high culture’ of the intellectual elite is experiencing dramatic internal transformations and differentiations. This process, in its own evasive and ambivalent terms, may dialectically—that is, through its own self-critique—set up a platform for a critical engagement with mass culture, nationalism, and social change.” (Zhang, 1998, p. 110)

Without such a critical awareness of this situation, it appears that the artist is merely acquiescing to the power structures. Peckham sees this critical awareness as part of a meaningful aspect to draw out from certain strands of artistic practice in China, highlighting their existence as “subtle gestures”:

“Here it appears that the critical functions of contemporary cultural practice can act as signifiers – or at least hints – of a certain political awareness, as the subtle gesture becomes a tool able to pry open a window onto further layers of reading and reception. In several important ways this strategy [...] is notable for its discursive weakness, particularly insofar as it is not necessarily one chosen by the artist but rather by his audience. By reading backwards, the slightest references to real-world phenomena become delicate quotations of political agendas only just so far removed from the commonsensical link between institutional critique and an understanding of the utilitarian value of cultural work in the world at large.” (Peckham, 2012, p. 259)

The Intellectual in China

Such an argument regarding the current possibilities for criticality in China on the part of the artist and within their practice keys into the previously mentioned understandings of the role of the intellectual in China over the longer historical period. The intellectual is a special being holding a privileged position in relation to authority, in that they have developed their role to incorporate a certain leeway to criticise that authority. This leeway is maintained as long as their critical ways are designed to be so subtle and demanding of interpretation that any resulting threat of reaction is blunted through that very process. But—as Peckham suggests—the meaning of such activity risks being lost in the background.

Within my MA dissertation I highlighted such approaches in relation to alternative spaces for cultural production in China: the artist-run spaces, the local community cultural organisations, and the socially engaged practices of which there were and still are a number. I was thinking through the ways in which independent activities and spaces could survive in a cultural and political environment that might not be supportive of them. I addressed a broad range of practices that were seeking these alternative ways of being that they perceived were necessary or desirable, and they saw were not being supported in the mainstream spaces of existence, be that in the art world itself or the broader social environment. Given the precarious environment in which they were attempting to exist and make a difference in, a practice of pragmatics seemed to be sensible in many cases. Such a pragmatics was in contrast to an overt expression of existence and action in the areas they were concerned with. Radical actions, while in some cases necessary, were seen as something of a last resort. In many cases these radical activities were actually counterproductive in that they triggered potentially disproportionate responses from the surrounding power structures that would immediately shut down all possibilities for activity. In such cases smaller, quieter, less public activities could be seen as possible ways forward. Withdrawal is one such mode of practice that could leave open the spaces for effect that radical actions closed down.

But how does one practice and/or address a practice where non-appearance has to be adopted as a methodology (or is a factor) arising from matters of choice or necessity? I proposed to address an understanding of non-appearance as a *productive* practice – a practice which might be seen to manifest itself (in an institutionalised fashion) in relation to the artworld (in relation to non-object-based work), but which also encompasses dialogical and socially aware activity more broadly.

I proposed that such a methodology and such practices reflected the socio-political realities of working in China. At that point my approach to these practices highlighted aspects of Western post-structuralism with which to develop ideas about the presence or absence of an author-figure, and of the spatially-productive work of the act of the author. Within the Chinese context the production of community already poses a problematic in relation to the State, as non-state-sanctioned groupings are treated with suspicion – if not repression. But it is this very problematic state that is central to an understanding of non-appearance that I address. A self-imposed restriction on the appearance of community may in this way be seen to create previously unavailable spaces for creative production that subvert restrictions on visible manifestations of community imposed from outside.

But as I stressed this was not a proposal of another form of ‘revolutionary’ practice that such a withdrawal from the apparent hopelessness of co-opted dissent might appear to propose. These practices may work surreptitiously, but they do not necessarily aim for change in a radical way. They aim, in their way, to exist and address real situations and problems in ways that do not lead to their own immediate extinction. This is the pragmatism in a practice that stands in contradistinction to more traditionally pro-active “activist” forms of practice. Such forms of activism can be effective in certain situations, but it can be argued that within the Chinese context (and perhaps in many other places) such effectiveness will have very limited value.

While I did not focus on sound specifically at that time, I was already trying to get to grips with some basic premises that sound practices also benefitted from. The pressures that “alternative” art spaces and communities are subject to in China bear similarities to the pressures that sound performance experiences. Sound displays the aspects of non-appearance that hold potential, because they do not rely so much on physical objects or visible appearances for their effects. Rather than the official art spaces, alternative spaces are also notable as they are the spaces that can accommodate experimental sound practices (at least in China). So there seems to be a synergy between alternative spaces and sound practices in terms of their needs – spatial or otherwise.

The case for withdrawal

The practice of withdrawal amongst the intellectual elites in China has a long and complex history. Such elites played an important role in the infrastructure of empire, particularly within the highly codified spaces of court culture, and their power came as a factor of their presence in those spaces. This presence had the practical effect of providing valuable knowledge and guidance to the ruler, and the

symbolic effect of supplying legitimacy to their rule. While the reality of the historical establishment and codification of such power relationships may be a romantic invention and hence problematic to draw upon, they nevertheless may provide some insights into present day practices.

In Yue Daiyun's book addressing depictions of the intellectual in Chinese fiction, the tendency of the intellectual to perform withdrawal is understood as a commonplace: "The Chinese intelligentsia had always found refuge in nature where remoteness and seclusion allowed a passive attitude toward an unsatisfactory world and their own powerlessness to alter it." (Yue, 1988, p. 30) Perhaps the most famous example of such withdrawal is the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, in the Three Kingdoms Period of Chinese history (around the third century CE). While the reality of these Sages is apocryphal, the story has become a strong symbolic model for the intellectual in China.

While not all intellectuals physically removed themselves from the court and politics of their time, even within the court they seem to have been able to cultivate the threat of withdrawal as their ultimate weapon of coercion against the powers that they were subject to. In his book *Detour and Access*, François Jullien outlines the problematic relationship between the intellectual elites and the absolute powers that they served in both China and in Greece. With the insights gained from the comparison of these two cultures, Jullien makes parallels with the situation in modern-day China, which while representing a very different political and social situation, displays modes of thought and practice that retain the principals institutionalised in earlier history.

This elite was able to develop for themselves a privileged position whereby it was tolerated that they should openly criticise the emperor with (hypothetically) little fear of retribution. This position was institutionalized as an important part of the court system to counter the arbitrary whims of an absolute power personified in the figure of a single deified emperor, or at lower levels of the hierarchy in the princes and aristocracy that governed by imperial fiat, or independent warlords and other figures maintaining absolute power over their fiefdoms. An important aspect of this privileged position—to present unmediated opinions on the power-holder's activity—was the option to withdraw themselves and their opinions with impunity, by formally requesting to leave the emperor's service. Within the institutional structure, such a loss would be seen as a disastrous weakening of the power-holder's ability to function effectively, and hence the threat of such an act was one of the few actual powers that the scholars retained. It played an important part in controlling the power-holder's activities by playing on their sense of shame, their sense of responsibility towards their role, and the rest of their retinue's loyalty to them as a figure of unquestioned power.

"Under the cover of riddles and by resorting to enigmas, they did not set off the prince's touchiness; under the guise of amusing, they expressed a political opinion. This was the ultimate way, the historian suggests, of retaining one's independent spirit while remaining tolerated by the authorities." (Jullien, 2000, p. 132)

Ultimately, Jullien is sceptical of the results of such pragmatism, worrying whether the "discreet, artistically veiled whisper of protest did not ultimately disarm the man of letters more than it protected him." (Jullien, 2000, p. 117) This reflects the hint of acquiescence mentioned above, aside from which the inadvertent result of a habit of dissimulation is endless suspicion on the part of the authorities:

"The compromise between the literati and the authorities, which one might think was balanced, proves one-sided, for as soon as the interlocutor expects insinuations, all formulations, even the most well intentioned, become suspicious, and no discourse can be innocuous." (Jullien, 2000, p. 135)

Where such practices re-occur in modern times, Jullien suggests the results are the same.

Similarly, Yue has also suggested that withdrawal held limited effect: "The policy of 'resisting position [*wei*] with virtue [*de*]' employed by the intelligentsia against established authority since the Wei-Jin period amounted to nothing more than passive withdrawal, a partial solution at best." (Yue, 1988, p. 67)

The separation from state that such withdrawal promises can be related to Hakim Bey's contemporary proposals for Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) in which practices seek to maintain themselves on their own terms (Bey, 1991). To point to a recent example in China, there is the case of the anarchist community, Womenjia Youth Autonomy Lab in Wuhan. Artist and activist Elaine W. Ho has observed that Womenjia have chosen to take the route of withdrawal from visibility in order to counter the threat they see in the tendency towards commodification in other practices: "Womenjia's observation of such trends validates the further peripheralizing of itself in its own autonomy and explains the decreasing amount of visible activity in the space." (Ho, 2014, p. 181)

“Positive” Silence?

So, where can we identify the positive in these practices of silence or withdrawal? Can the earlier mentions of the manifestations of Occupy and the events that preceded them, or Bartleby’s own occupation, or the historical examples of the relationship between intellectual and authority provide some kind of significant or effective practice? Do the creations, breakdowns, and recreations of social and political orders that these silences reflect, or work to enact, allow them to be viewed positively? Can being silent or withdrawing create opportunities that are not possible through audibility or active participation?

It might be said that in all the cases mentioned silence and withdrawal have been acts that, despite their failings, nevertheless assert the presence/absence of a body. Can the basic experiences of presence and absence provide some clues as to how to proceed? In this sense our focus is pinpointed on the bodily responses in relation to other bodies.

Brandon LaBelle quotes Adam Jaworski from his book *The Power of Silence*, proposing that:

“[...] silence can sometimes signal that the channel of communication remains open, or that one has no intention of closing it, while speech would precisely have the effect of overtly terminating the possibility of further communication between participants.” (Jaworski, 1993, p. 48; LaBelle, 2010, pp. 72–73)

Silence can therefore be an indication of the simple presence of a body, and it is in that presence that a possibility for togetherness and communication exists. LaBelle elaborates:

“Silence is then a productive material lever for allowing certain information or expressions to pass between oneself and another—it articulates while at the same time operating as a covert mechanism in the choreography of social exchange.” (LaBelle, 2010, p. 73)

Does this suggest that if silence proposes a way to deal with a world that may not be supportive for all members of society, then can it also propose forms of society that provide such support?

Although Cage’s silences are criticized for isolating the audience from social concerns, we have also seen how Ultra-Red have adopted similar forms to locate subjects who are not addressed by society, and in this way to form their collectivity. We have also seen how *onkyō* might be said to produce an audience as a collectivity through its extreme conditions of listening. Plourde presents the bodily demands of the situation in the following way:

“In the case of *onkyō*, the enforced silence and demands of listening are so amplified as to become reflexive. The audience member becomes aware of his/her own body and the demands placed on it.” (Plourde, 2008, p. 286)

It seems that it is this reflexivity that is key. In relation to the sound art and experimental music cultures of China, Adel Wang Jing has developed her thinking around the act of affective listening. For her this “affect” represents a contract between the performer and the audience, a contract that marks a leaving of space by the artist for the audience to become part of the work. This is a focus on listening as a way to restrain an impulse to perform:

“Such activities demand and create a sound world for actual coexistence among participants. [...] I proposed the term ‘affective listening’ to describe a mode of listening afforded by sound practices in China that acknowledges this coexistence [...] I want to further propose that affective listening is a willingness, a commitment. It works for those who intend to understand themselves through sound, as well as for those who intend to connect to the world in a sonic way.” (Wang, 2016, p. 115)

“In Chinese medicine, the ear is connected to all parts of the body. The ear is the body. Affective listening is a sonic way of being with/in a sonorous poetic space infused with its creators’ intelligence and sensations. The creator is at the same time an affective listener. Therefore, affective listening is always already listening together. It is to share the same poetic space, to exchange energy, and to spend time together.” (Wang, 2016, pp. 124–125)

In relation to this, Wang quotes Yan Jun as saying:

“The most interestingly subtle moment is not looking at each other, but listening together. That’s the best kind of empathy: with sound, to fall calm, to stay, to forget ourselves together.” Yan Jun, quoted in (Wang, 2016, p. 125)

This is what might be understood as the positive significance of silent practices.

It is evident that to assume concrete, measurable 'results' from such practices does not align with the particular forms of practice described here. Although any activity must have something that might be called a 'result' in the world, nevertheless the focus of these practices is the on-going process as being significant rather than an artificially framed 'result'. Without ignoring their problematic ambiguities and ambivalences, such might be said to be the poetic nature of such practices, in that they leave a potentially abundant space for interpretation and the realisation of community.

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—c.9313 words—

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