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Sonic Subjectivities

**Ruth Herbert** 

What consumers want, in this frequently digitized and dry world, is an *experience*. Mood Media Blog entry, Sept. 9, 2013.

If you're just sat there at a classical concert, you're supposed to be paying attention, but what am I paying attention to? You know, it's a sound thing – there's nothing to look at, is there really? That sends me to sleep (laughs).

[Gary, 33]

... you can't improve sound by having only silence. The problem is to use each at the proper time.

Norton Juster, The Phantom Tollbooth.

In 2010, Susan Philipsz won the UK Turner Prize for her sound installation Lowlands, comprising three recorded versions of a 16th century lament (featuring the solo, disembodied voice of Philipsz), relayed over a public address system; initially under three bridges over the River Clyde, Glasgow and latterly within an empty gallery at Tate Britain. This was the first time a sound installation had been nominated for the prestigious award and contemporary art magazine Artpulse retrospectively cited the win as marking sound art's "glorious moment of acceptance as an art form" (Botella 2013). Lowlands was also the subject of considerable media controversy, notably accusations that the work was music, not art, together with the (perennial) criticism of Turner Prize-nominated pieces as "too conceptual." It is easy to reject such reactions as uninformed, but underlying them are expectations to do with the making, receiving and nature of sounding art (meaning any artistic activity/object utilizing sound) that are fundamentally interesting from psychological (and philosophical) perspectives. Themes these expectations relate to include ways that art forms are categorized, the blurring of phenomenological dividing lines between subjective experiences of art and life, understandings of experience as "aesthetic," the multisensory nature of perception and crucially, imaginative, performative aspects of subjectivity.

This chapter explores the extent to which subjective experiences of sound art (including gallery-based and site specific audio visual works) and informal experiences of music in daily life demonstrate shared phenomenological territory. Given that both may possess an aesthetic dimension and feature fluctuations between concentrated and distracted attentional focus, how accurate are distinctions between "musical" and "everyday" types of listening, whether manifest in musicological divisions between autonomous and heteronomous listening (i.e. listening where music/sound is the main focus of attention versus listening where attention is distributed between music and other things, such as thoughts, actions or visual phenomena) or Gaver's (1993) separation of ways of listening centered on acoustic attributes and physical sources? And is there a qualitative difference between preplanned experiences (e.g. choosing to take part in a soundwalk or visit an installation) in which particular listening stances are consciously adopted, and those that occur spontaneously, primarily informed by unconscious processing?

#### **Conception and Reception**

The creative process of practitioners defining themselves as working within the broad field of sound art appears to be informed by organizing ideas and intentions differing from those informing the creative processes of those defining themselves as working primarily in the field of music. Such ideas and intentions are products of historical trajectories of practice, arguably fairly short in the case of sound art and extremely long for music. The origins of the diverse body of work commonly categorized as sound art are most frequently located in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, manifestations of (more or less) organized sound, commonly conceptualized (if sometimes retrospectively and not transculturally) as "music," occur far earlier, developing simultaneously alongside other forms of art in the transition between the

Middle and Upper Palaeolithic era at least 35,000 years ago (Lewis-Williams 2002: 40). Music's earliest appearance was as an indivisible element of multimedia sacred and secular rituals. For centuries, the creation of music has been linked to particular contexts and occasions. That's to say the primary creative intention has been that music should be "fit for purpose" – functional, whether as background enhancement (e.g. *Tafelmusik*, film music, Muzak), marker of special occasions (rites of passage such as weddings/funerals) or instrument of social/group cohesion (e.g. work songs, football chants). 20th century advances in recording technologies also facilitated the design and marketing of music as a commodity (e.g. CD or downloaded track), with uses ranging from self-regulation to badge of identity or membership of a particular cultural group. Although the use of music as an agent of consciousness transformation (e.g. facilitating trancing) can be observed cross-culturally, this is but one amongst many functions of music. Compositional intentions concerning the creation of music have often tended to privilege aspects of the work itself (regardless of the extent to which musical elements are fixed or prescribed) – its affective power, style and design, how it reflects preoccupations of the creator(s), society or culture, rather than centering on ways in which the experience of the receiver may be altered or enhanced.

By contrast, the manipulation of subjectivity and a desire to design experience have been central to the creation of sonic art. Sonic art may be commissioned for specific situations or contexts (e.g. generative soundscapes at airports, walkways, lobbies, hospitals), but the main emphasis is on mentality: re-educating and reawakening individual minds. "Sound provides a means to activate perception," (LaBelle 2006: xii) particularly in sounding art with an overtly conceptual basis, where the intention is that experience is "completed through the very act of perception" (LaBelle, 2006: 68).

From the Italian Futurist's (1913) manifesto, with its call to listen afresh to industrial and military noise, through Cage's demand that music be inclusive of all sound, to the

intention of Fluxus to "collapse the distance between art and life" (68), a repeating theme has been the overt request for experiencers to alter ways they perceive the everyday world. Cage was influenced by Japanese Zen Buddhist teachings concerning cultivation of pure, direct sensory awareness, marked by meditative, equanimous "bare attention" and disengagement from self (Lowe 2011: 117). Within Buddhist traditions, de-conditioning of habitual cognitive, affective and sensory responses marks just the first stage of a mental training facilitating liberation from stress and suffering (sometimes termed "attachment" or "craving") (Lowe 2011: 117). This type of detachment from automatic experiential response has been and continues to be a central preoccupation of sound art practitioners (whether or not overtly linked to spiritual practices of consciousness transformation) (LaBelle, 2013: xii).

Despite significant differences between the creative intent of sound artists and the majority of music composers, empirical evidence suggests phenomenological similarities between ways in which sound art and music are received. Notably, subjective experiences of music in daily life may demonstrate an equivalent detachment from habitual response, multimodal character and perceptual blurring between the aesthetic and the everyday.

## **Framing Experience**

To assume that the dominant medium of an art form (e.g. sound) prescribes a dominant mode of reception (listening) may seem logical. In psychological terms however, isolating types of listening, e.g. as "active" or "passive," does not mean the totality of experience has been captured. In fact, such categorization may serve to obscure or splinter the phenomenological essence of experience as an organized whole (gestalt). This confusion is evident in debates as to whether particular works are examples of visual or sound art, and has been a topic of reflection for several practitioners. As multimedia artist Bill Viola notes:

We usually think of the camera as an "eye" and the microphone as an "ear," but all the senses exist simultaneously ... Western science has decided ... to isolate the senses in order to study them, but much of my work has been aimed at putting it all back together. (Viola 1995: 48-9)

From an ecological perspective (based on the work of J. J Gibson (1979)), experience is the totality of a network of interactions; the mental state, prior knowledge, accumulated ways of responding and needs of the perceiver, characteristics of the environment, and stimulus attributes of an object. From this interplay arise "affordances": "The uses, functions, or values of an object – the opportunities that it affords to a perceiver" (Clarke 2005: 117). The following amplification of aspects of this interaction will indicate the extent to which subjectivity emerges as inevitably mediated.

Enculturation. Interactions with sound art and music in everyday life are informed by accumulated habits/expectations that are culturally conditioned, acquired largely unconsciously. The term gaze is used in different contexts (painting, photography, literature, television, medicine) to refer to various enculturated "modes of seeing" and Bourdieu's term "habitus" has been similarly utilized to capture the situatedness of musical experience (Becker 2010: 130). Subjective experiences of high involvers in any medium (whether practitioners or receivers, formally or informally trained) are marked by an absorbed interaction with stimulus properties and/or physical or cultural sources they specify, and expectations to do with the type of experience sought (e.g. use of music to heighten emotion, or desire for "some attentive looking, the essential museum mood" (Alpers, in Kelly 2011: 202)). Experiential mental sets we might define as "gallery stance" or "concert hall stance" are commonly termed "aesthetic responses"; contemplative appreciation of the "thing itself," freed from the need to act. Such stances towards the arts have been shown to be absent in young children under the

age of seven who have not developed notions of "art-as-product," experiencing it primarily as a practical process (Gardener 1993: 141).

Situation. Gallery spaces act as experiential frames providing a "glaze of aestheticality" (Connor 2005: 48) signaling that the items they contain constitute "art" and so priming the receiver that there is "something' to see in the same way that the tourist's interest is directed to 'landmarks' on a guided tour ... experience ... [is] directed by both stimulus properties and personal preconceptions in a way that experiences of daily life are not" (Herbert 2011: 183). Spaces additionally imply behaviors that impact upon experience: the freedom of movement and attentional focus experienced by the spectator at an exhibition is in sharp contrast to the enforced stationary attitude of audiences at concerts. Technologies such as CDs and headphones also serve as powerful experiential frames. Both are used to relay schizophonic sound (i.e. sound that is split from its source and recontextualized), priming ways sound is perceived; for example distribution of CD recordings of soundscapes, divorced from their original context and referential associations implicitly suggests that a particular sound environment is to be considered as music or art (Koutsomichalis 2013). Headphones enable listeners to create private spaces in public contexts via the creation of "auditory bubbles" (Bull 2007) that may or may not reference surroundings.

Content. Aesthetic artefacts (notably music) provide incomplete sensory information. Paintings, for example, lack a third spatial dimension, preventing the viewer entering and exploring pictures, thus disrupting perception-action cycles and triggering contemplative stances (Clarke 2005: 137-8). An active, performative approach to reception is encouraged: interpretation can "fill in the gaps" (Windsor 2000). Multimodal audio-visual installations and multimodal everyday music listening episodes — where sound poses "as a quality of the environment" (Kassabian 2013: 10) — surround and immerse the receiver to a greater degree. The tangible frustration of the author's (then) 8 year old daughter at the National Gallery,

London, transfixed by George Stubbs' lifelike 18<sup>th</sup> century painting of the race-horse "Whistlejacket," but wanting "him to gallop out to be touched," contrasts strikingly with her delight (four years later) when exploring the richly interactive audio/visual/tactile environment provided by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist's installation "Administering Eternity" at the Hayward Gallery.

From an evolutionary psychological perspective, one reason the arts may be said to have adaptive value (to support survival) is that they provide platforms for shared subjectivity, affording opportunities to escape from the confines of individual minds and experiment with alternative perspectives. This is particularly evident in sound art, evocatively captured by David Toop's experience of a Janet Cardiff audio walk: "I am inside her head, she is inside mine and we are both inside the stories of many books" (2004: 122), echoing Adornian discussion of the connectivity or "we-ness" provided by technologically mediated forms of everyday music listening (Bull 2007: 23). Music's polysemic potential means that, in daily life, the balance between perceived subjectivities (of creator and receiver) is especially malleable, evident in the prevalence of overtly self-referential music uses (Sloboda 2010).

## **Mapping Subjectivity**

Psychological Processes. Empirical evidence from the author's study of the phenomenology of everyday music listening experiences (Herbert 2011a,b; 2013) reveals that individuals experience a range of cognitive, affective and sensory alterations of experience from a perceived "baseline" state. These include a changed sense of time (stasis, suspension of "clock" time), awareness span (broad/narrow), attentional focus (outwards/inwards/fluctuating), mentation (imaginative involvement/associations or reduction of thought), sensory perception (sharpened, distorted) and self (altered or absent).

Particularly prevalent are the processes of absorption (effortless, non-volitional involvement) and normative dissociation (non-pathological detachment from aspects of self or situation), themselves composites of a number of experiential threads (Herbert 2011a: 3).

Interestingly, in sound art literature and beyond there are frequent references to the act of listening as immersive and absorbed, contrasted with the act of looking as separated and detached. From philosopher John Dewey's statement that "vision is a spectator, while hearing is a participator" (1927: 219), to Murray Schafer's keynote lecture comment (at the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, 2011) that "you are always at the edge of the landscape looking in, but you are at the centre of the soundscape looking out," the distinction between an omnidirectional, ever present 360° auditory field and a far narrower (up/down/sideways, but always frontal) visual field is repeatedly made. Yet because sight and sound are predominantly fused in experiences of sound art and music in daily life, such distinctions don't neatly map onto the global feel of experiences as primarily absorbed or dissociative. Additionally, senses may meld into one another; the ears may be focal organs of hearing, but loud or low sounds may be sensed as bodily resonance (Ihde 2007: 44) — an example of "haptic hearing" where listening encompasses kinaesthetics and touch (Kassabian 2013).

Absorbed and Dissociated Everyday Experiences of Music. Music is commonly used as a blending device in everyday life, binding together selective elements of external awareness that might not otherwise be perceptually connected, with internal thoughts and associations (Herbert 2011). Visual listening (usually when traveling, on foot, by car or public transport) is particularly common, "aestheticizing" the environment by soundtracking it (Bull 2007: 39):

...one of the things I'm always thinking about is the environment and the way that how something sounds can work with images as well. [Gary] (Herbert 2011: 60)

[music] makes the scene look better than it is ... the music emphasizes things ...it seems like you can be watching a film. [Imogen] (Herbert 2011: 59)

Individuals up to the age of about 35 are likely to have encountered music primarily in multimedia contexts (e.g. TV, YouTube, computer games), expecting it to interact with other elements of experience. The multisensory nature of such episodes can make them richly absorbing:

Walking out of the gym ... I had to stop at the top of the steps because the skyline was fascinating. I also had to find the right track on my CD to watch the sky for a moment. It was The National "All the Wine," which is quite a calm song. I listened for about one minute, whilst noticing the birds fly across the light in the clouds. The music made the experience more like a moment of meditation. [Sophie] (Herbert 2011: 88)

Here, music is chosen to be congruent with environment, affording an enhanced visual awareness of selective phenomena (light/clouds/birds) marked by a broad awareness span. The song's repeating motifs, regular pulse and slow rate of harmonic change dissolves temporal synchronicity, substituting what Jonathan Kramer (1988) has termed vertical time for horizontal time, i.e. a present-centered stasis characterized by non-teleological (non-narrative) listening. The sharpened, direct awareness, fascination with repetition, pattern and movement is typical of such episodes. At other times absorbed experiences of music may feature a selective focus on acoustic attributes: "textures, timbres, rhythms for their own sake with no particular rational attempts to make associations" [Max] (Herbert 2011: 112), or demonstrate an inwardly directed attention and imaginative focus: "vague images of cool cathedral with sunlit patches outlined in gothic window shape" [Will]. (Herbert 2011: 76)

A substantial proportion of everyday music listening experiences are dissociative, the imposed "extra" acoustic space serving either to entirely absent perceivers from their current situation, placing them in a networked, distributed subjectivity "somewhere else" (Kassabian 2013) or to impact upon immediate lived experience, as in the following episode when Will listens to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* in the car:

Reaching the roundabout on a dual carriage way, the sharp clarity of the yellow and black chevron pattern shouts at me to appreciate it ... traffic slows ...

I feel curiously remote. Stare at some pedestrians at a junction and realize I feel almost too distant. They look paper thin, almost alien, I have no connection with them: or rather, I do have a connection but am observing it and them. [Will] (Herbert 2011: 129)

Qualities afforded by music blend with and heighten visual perception of surroundings, extending to a sense of detachment from experience and a sense of both depersonalization and derealization. In general, "auditory bubbles" created during dissociative episodes may be absolute (as in the car or when using over-ear headphones) or partial (as in the interim dissociative position adopted by "one-ear-in" headphone listeners, effectively splitting themselves between two spaces).

Absorbed and Dissociated Experiences of Sound Art. In terms of location and behavior, soundwalks and audiowalks seem to parallel mundane headphonic solo music listening experiences most closely. The process of absorption is clearly evident in Christina Kubisch's Electrical Walks (2003 ongoing) in which listeners explore various sites (buildings, cities) wearing specially designed headphones which make electromagnetic signals from surrounding objects audible. Perceivers' relationships with surroundings are reconfigured, apparent in video footage, showing individuals moving curiously through environments, pausing, crouching, their almost animal-like body language in stark contrast to the non-

headphone wearers around them. Awareness span narrows, there is a close attentional focus on qualities of sound (and vision) *per se* and the open-ended, uncomposed nature of the walks leads to the absorbed sense of "not being in time but being as time, what Nietzsche calls 'becoming' and Bergson 'duration'" (Cox, in Kelly 2011: 85). By contrast, Janet Cardiff's audio walks prescribe a teleological experience of time, where absorption stems both from the binaural recording technique which creates a 360° virtual auditory reality, and Cardiff's narrative, which stimulates imaginative involvement and heightens sensory perception, as an excerpt from David Toop's account of his experience of *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B) (1999) indicates:

... pulled along by the compulsion of her work. We walk along Brick Lane, past the sari shops ... the vague blur of vivid sweets, pungent scents and vivid music, into bleak side streets where a sense of threat enters the narrative – footsteps approaching from behind. (Toop 2004: 122)

Experiences of multimedia installations and multisensory absorbed everyday listening experiences also demonstrate a shared phenomenology:

It was soothing to lie there, amid a labyrinth of diaphanous curtains, with projected images wafting and rippling over their surfaces... Flocks of sheep, marrow flowers, blue skies and sudden showers of sparks, as if a welder were at work in some corner of paradise, floated by. I think I nodded off for a bit. Music drifts through the galleries like aural valium. (Searle 2011)

UK art critic Adrian Searle describes "Administering Eternity" by Pipilotti Rist, referred to earlier in this chapter. Rist's installations function as immersive environments where multiple impacts (auditory, visual, tactile in this case) afford a rich sense of involvement, characterized by a sharpened sensory awareness and present-centered selective attentional focus. (The same technique of mobilizing multiple sensory modes is used in formal hypnotherapeutic inductions). The difference between such experiences and informal experiences of music is that installations constitute pre-planned, intentional creations — "pre-packaged" forms of intersubjective involvement as opposed to the subjective spontaneous, frequently non-volitional aestheticization of aspects of everyday life.

Dissociation is primarily evident in the *reception* of music but it is central to the reception *and* creation of sound art. Artists overtly seek to de-condition perception; direct awareness and disengagement from self, discussed earlier in this chapter, are key phenomenological components of dissociation.

Two main ways of promoting dissociation are evident in sound art. In the first, unknown sounds, including infra- and ultra-sounds (see the Ihde chapter in this Companion) heard in familiar contexts may promote a sense of derealization. The sounds heard when participating in one of Kubisch's Electrical Walks are absorbing, but their "electrical-ness" can be simultaneously alien, at times dehumanizing perception of surroundings and tapping a schizophrenic subjectivity that hallucinates sounds from normally inert, silent objects.

The second way features one acoustic space mapped onto another (via headphones or a PA system), serving to "literally split the listening body ... unhing[ing] time and place, dislocat[ing] one's bearings" (LaBelle 2011: 226). In Philipsz's *Lowlands* installation, described at the opening of this chapter, the transposition of an incorporeal, vulnerable female voice upon an austere, resonant impersonal space (walkways under bridges) affords a disorientating disjuncture, serving to jolt (some!) individuals out of the absented stance and

inwardly directed attentional focus that accompanies automatic behaviors (here, walking through a transitional space) into a sharpened state of sensory awareness. It was precisely this awakening of perception that the Turner Prize judging panel praised Philipsz for.

Adding video to audio walks creates layering of realities, promoting several levels of dissociation. In Cardiff/Miller's *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (2012), located in Kassel train station, the interaction between user, environment and storyworld is reconfigured; the perceiver is at once viewer, protagonist and listener. Actual and recorded visual environments and actual and recorded auditory environments resemble each other, but also contain striking differences. Dissociation occurs because they are slightly out of sync. The perceptual disorientation that results features an attentional divide between several audio-visual foci, fused with heightened imaginative involvement triggered by Cardiff's narrative.

All examples of sounding art and music referred to can also be conceptualized in terms of kinds of consciousness. Several consciousness theorists have distinguished between awareness that is primarily present-centered and autobiographical awareness, i.e. awareness that is reliant on self consciousness and informed by memory (e.g. Damasio 1999; Edelman 1989), and "phenomenal consciousness" — "ineffable (or indescribable) qualities," sometimes termed qualia (Blackmore 2005: 3), such as the pure sensory awareness of the redness of an apple or the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Experiences of sounding art and music typically demonstrate a fluctuation between kinds of consciousness, e.g. in *Lowlands*, a core awareness of sights and sounds, fused with a phenomenal olfactory awareness of "under-bridge-ness" might shift to an autobiographical awareness referencing memories/associations related to lost love and sea songs.

Evolutionary perspectives on the psychology of experience suggest that the aesthetic appeal of particular sensory phenomena originated in the adaptive ability to assess aspects of surroundings as advantageous/dangerous and that the arts emerged as an inevitable

consequence of the development of long term memory and the capacity to imagine (Lewis-Williams 2002). The human propensity for multimodal experiences taking individuals "somewhere else" has received recognition within the burgeoning commercial field of Experience Design, one area where music and sound art directly overlap.

## **Experience Design**

When customers step into a bricks-and-mortar location, they're looking for theater. They want a show. They want direct experience ... (Arussy 2010: 85)

Experience Design, a practice located at the intersection between the aesthetic and the mundane, emerged from the concept of an "experience economy," originally a business philosophy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Its influence has grown during the last decade, influencing marketing strategies across retail, tourism, hospitality, arts, leisure, education and healthcare sectors. Key is the notion that consumers (particularly in affluent societies) value memorable experience, especially those referencing fictional or virtual realities rather than material objects (of which they have plenty). The components of experience manipulated vary, according to context and purpose. In retail outlets that are centrally managed and have uniform brand identity, the intention might be to provide a semi-theatrical experience through multimodal installations that function as stage sets, bombarding the senses, promoting imaginative fantasy surrounding the brand, affecting arousal levels, prescribing the route and speed at which individuals travel round the store etc. via "touch points" (moments of engagement). As one designer for Mood Media (the multisensorial successor to Muzak) puts it: "color, shape, texture, text, scent, and music act together to provide a holistic experience of a brand, engaging all senses" (Frishkey 2013). Mood Media Inc's 2010 redesign of New Look's flagship store in Dublin, Ireland utilized a bespoke music playlist, video content over escalators and interactive changing rooms, allowing customers to see favorite images of themselves in New Look outfits on video displays in-store. A differing version of Experience

Design comprises the creation of custom-made soundscapes or light/sound installations in public contexts that might be seen as stressful or enervating. Intentions vary, but reference wellbeing — in terms of both health and effective functioning. For example, composer Brian Eno has developed the concept of hospital-based installations affording spaces for relaxation/healing, as in his sound and light installation 77 Million Paintings for Montefiore (2013), employing a generative (constantly changing) soundscape in a hospital reception area. Other examples include soundscapes in airport settings, e.g. a 2005 trial of daytime and nighttime generative soundscapes employed in the walkways of Glasgow Airport (Treasure 2011: 233) and the recent development of soundscapes both generative and interactive for everyday home environments, as in David Toop's work for Andreas Raptopoulos' UK sound agency FutureAcoustic. So-called "Adaptive Acoustic Architecture" represents perhaps the closest meshing between sound art and everyday music listening to date.

#### **Conclusion**

Both music in everyday life and sound art may function as prosthetic technologies of the self (DeNora 2000: 46-7), choreographing consciousness and so mediating subjectivity. Listening to music and sound art serves to "soften the edges of individuality" creating a diffused subjectivity, in which individuals reach "beyond bounds of singularity to broader, multiple space" (LaBelle 2013: 245-6). A significant number of interactions with sound art and music in daily life feature de-automatization of habitual cognitive, affective and sensory responses, plus a heightened, present-centered sensory awareness. Conceptualizing these subjective experiences in terms of listening modes captures the character of various listening behaviors, but simultaneously obscures the processual nature and shifting essence of subjective experience. It also fails to map the phenomenological totality of such interactions, markedly

what is perhaps the most common "mode" of experiencing any art form or aspect of daily life: multimodal or multisensory experience featuring a distributed attention. Crucially, sound art, music and commercial multimedia installations in a variety of everyday settings (shops, airports, hospitals) reference what, from an evolutionary psychological perspective, is regarded as a human need to access alternate realities/ways of being; both to see afresh and to escape. As Cardiff and Miller (2012) observe with relation to their work:

Cardiff: "You could say our work is about time travel in a way ... the walks especially.

A step away from reality – consensus reality – in the interests of seeing it better."

Miller: "We've been trying to escape reality for, like 35 years ...it's been going O.K. so far." (Wray 2012)

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# **Further Reading**

R. Herbert, *Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011a) analyses numerous first-hand accounts of everyday experiences of music.

C. Kelly, (ed.) *Sound*. (Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2011) is a rich sourcebook for exploring the phenomenology of sound art.