

Hotel Womb

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Maybe you've heard this one before...

In utero, four and a half months after conception, the foetus begins to hear. Well before sight, smell, taste and touch are anything more than a vague hint of the surrounding world, sound is bombarding the unborn child. And a barrage of sound it is. A recording made through the belly of a pregnant woman designed to serve as a soundtrack to a video of an ultrasound examination, sounds not unlike submersion in water - constant muffled rumbling broken intermittently by louder muffled rumbling sounds. The images recorded via an ultrasound are made possible by the use of extremely low frequency soundwaves, penetrating the woman's body and bouncing back, not unlike radar. This provides a fascinating insight into the womb but what of the accompanying 'insound'? Recorded by a contact microphone through the wall of the pregnant woman's abdomen, it's surely a very inaccurate representation of the acoustic environment of the womb. We have to imagine what it would really sound like: the thundering of mother's heart, her enormous bellow lungs drawing and expelling air, her digestive system tangle pushing around fluids and solids in every gushing direction. But perhaps more important than what a foetus hears, after all it is well short of the cognitive ability to even note "Oh, that was a sound!" is the issue of how these sounds sound. Through fluid, at close proximity, muffled, bassy, lacking high frequency definition - all descriptions, it should be noted, that make a comparison with post-natal, external world hearing.

A great deal of fuss is made about the fact that the unborn child hears its mother's voice more often than any other sound (of external origin.) The common wisdom being that a mother talking to her newborn gives the child something familiar to latch on to, to calm its wide eyed terror at this big bright universe it has been coldly thrown into. I'll happily accept that sonic familiarity in a newborn is more likely than recognition in any of the other senses, but would a woman's voice only ever heard internally through her body really be recognized in the outside world? Perhaps a child with a few years of listening and mental sonic cataloguing to rely on might be able to realise that this is the same voice once heard through blood and bone now heard through air. That this voice now appearing to emanate from the mouth of a woman is the same voice that rippled through the warm amniotic fluid like the voice of God. But a newborn?

If ever you come across someone who honestly believes that playing Mozart to a child through the wall of the uterus will improve the brat's intelligence ('because of all the rich frequencies, don't you know?'), do me a favour and just tell them to get down to the Prahran pool here in Melbourne and experience Beethoven piped underwater. As the locals do their laps, apart from the loss of frequency information, there's an

awful lot of noise in the ears as that water sloshes about. Most of us have experienced the harsh radio-static interference sound of water in the ears. But then again, hearing an orchestra through water is probably how the music sounded to the composer himself as he aged, his hearing degenerating into deafness. But here's my point. Just as Ludwig in his later years had to compose with his head resting on top of the piano, giving the soundwaves a more direct route through wood into flesh and bone, so too do we all experience sound as physical vibration, and at the very commencement of our lives. This is the sensory experience that rocks our world, that shapes and defines our environment, that is our environment for the first months of existence. We hear it and we feel it. And when we are suddenly pushed and bullied by forces we can't even comprehend, let alone resist, through that ridiculously narrow passage and into the 'light', and it's violently cold and bright, it all sounds different, wrong, unfamiliar, alien. All of sudden there is something to compare the old world to, to contrast with 'home' and we all react in the only way we can. We scream. Loudly. Drown out the alien noises. Make our own sound, under our own control.

The womb then gets recreated in the outside world, in a myriad of ways, each of us subconsciously yearning for the security and comfort of the past. But the key to a successful 'hotel womb' is in the sonic. The constant muffled rumbling we all secretly love. And every sound that gets added to the mix must be dull punctuation or in smooth sympathy.

The car is a travelling womb: purring engine, rubber humming over asphalt, wind rushing past sealed windows. (Why, at peak hour, can one see row after row of cars designed to accommodate four all carrying just one?) The walkman also allows you to totally disconnect yourself from the sound of the world, the world of sounds, whatever your taste in music. (This is quite different from the 'ghetto blaster' perched upon the shoulder, as this is clearly an outward act of sonic violence, forcibly claiming a larger space around oneself than social conventions usually allow.) An effective walkman womb is not just a question of volume (i.e., turning down or drowning out the external sounds) but also a matter of equalisation (i.e., the cutting of high frequencies, the muffling effect.) One doesn't even need music if the headphones can cover the ears and create an acoustic seal, attenuating the idiot rantings of the public transport losers beside one, turning them into a distant radio soap opera. And so it becomes easy to understand the allure of a sonically effective 'hotel womb': the soothing drone of the dryer/dishwasher/electric fan inducing domestic narcosis; the calming intermittent swooshing of traffic outside the bedroom window at 3am; the lulling drumming of rain on the iron roof overhead; the hypnotic rattle of a late afternoon suburban train; the mesmerising babble of rushing water in the

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huge pipes of a causeway overflow; the hubbub of a dozen candlelit conversations in a crowded restaurant; and so on.

To be honest, a lot of the music I listen to plays the part of acoustic uterine wall. I'm employing music in that role right now, as I write this. It creates the barrier to the wider environment that I need to get into my own headspace, to concentrate on my own internal world, to block out the distracting trivialities of other people. (It's ironic that the work that I do is always for other people - without an audience to receive my work I wouldn't see the need - but I can only actually do it by ignoring them/you.)

An effective sonic womb is only possible when it does not require one's full aural attention. Engaging sonic detail or repetition that becomes irritating are the pitfalls to avoid. It's ironic, or perhaps the whole point, that the musical genres of Minimalism and Drone are the practice of focussing attention upon the details of seemingly unchanging, static sounds or melodic phrases. When one gets into this state of listening, acutely aware of minute changes and subtleties, whether or not one takes it to transcendental extremes, it is in some ways the opposite of the anesthetizing womb, but paradoxically can have a similar effect; insulating, engulfing, immersing.

Piped music, as in the recorded music played in public spaces, depending upon its intended function, can be either perfect sonic insulation or the very opposite. In department stores the subtle, difficult to hear music is designed to encourage you to move through the store, from potential purchase to potential purchase. So while it encases you, encouraging you to focus upon the retail product at hand, it also breaks the embryonic shell by creating a narrative flow to prevent stasis and excessive lingering. The ultimate mall music, being instrumental music produced by the company called Muzak, has long since disappeared from common usage, but it had excellent wombal qualities; vaguely familiar melodies in smooth instrumental arrangements. Alternatively, the music you hear in food courts nowadays is usually Top 40 radio and it tries to grab your attention and hold you there, seducing you into a few more minutes away from the hustle and bustle, another bucket of chips, maybe a cola. However, both these examples of piped music face the problem of becoming irritating if you listen too closely.

From all this one can clearly see that sound is intrinsically linked to environment, and environment is something one experiences, as opposed to observes. Surround sound, or the presentation of sound art on a number of loudspeakers greater than two, is currently heralded as a step forward in the creation of immersive sonic environments. This is all well and good but sound is always immersive, it always pervades the environment,

even from a very quiet singular source.

If one accepts that art is communication then sound art is communication via environment. It becomes logical that sound artists should be interested in installation, where a total environment can be constructed in order to communicate. But artists should not feel that installation is the only suitable format for sound work. If one considers the environments in which a work might be experienced, and think of the work as a letter bomb or a missile that can penetrate outer skins to explode at the core, then opportunities for communication may present themselves in surprising ways. Artists working in public spaces have the challenge of overcoming potential inhibitors already located in public space, from traffic and countless other sonic interferences, to indifference and unpreparedness in the attitudes of people, inadvertently finding themselves art goers. On the other hand these are all things that could be taken advantage of. To infiltrate the 'hotel wombs' of people and subtly alter their environment takes subterfuge and shrewdness. Being aware of expectations and finding ways to play with them is ultimately what I'm suggesting here.

The evolution of music has largely been a result of artists challenging conventions while working within them. A recent example would be the current excitement in the UK over the new phenomenon of 'bootlegging' where an a cappella version of a well known pop song is overlaid onto an instrumental version of another well known pop song. Here again people's attraction to the familiar drives the practice, in addition to the play with expectations. Such a track consisting of Kylie Minogue's vocal for 'Can't Get You Outta My Head' over top of New Order's 'Blue Monday' even made it onto mainstream Melbourne radio pop station FoxFM. That was a gentle but significant little detonation in the radio environment.

All this may sound like some Marxist yearning for the reconciliation of art and life. Not so. I am under no such hippie delusions. Someone of note, sometime ago said, 'Art is art and everything else is everything else.' Sound art may be currently in vogue, it may be hip and groovy, (and it may just as quickly become passé) but it cannot be anything more 'useful' or 'pragmatic' than any other art form has ever been. And so should it be. But that's not to say that artists don't exist in the same world as everyone else, that we are somehow outside of society. Of course not. We are born, we eat, we shit and we die like the rest of humanity. It's just that what we spend most of our energy doing has absolutely no bearing on that birth, eat, shit, die cycle. However, like most artists, I find pleasure in the perverse, and I quite like the idea of this totally useless thing we call 'art', penetrating daily life and somehow making a tiny impact upon, what must surely be both the most meaningful and simultaneously pointless thing; human existence.

Sounds like a beginning....