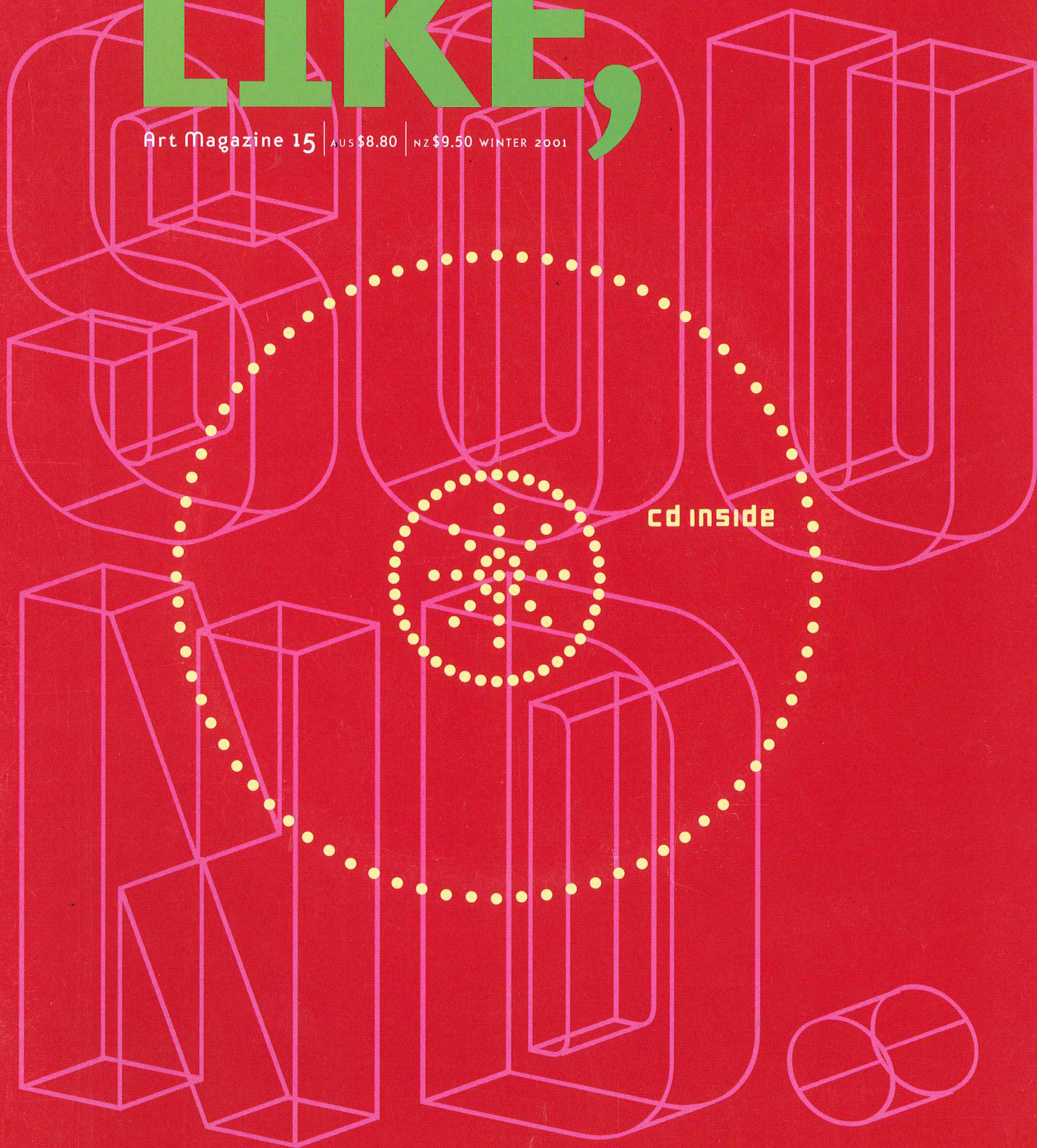


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# my silent dream

NAT BATES

Hearing is functional, automatic, unavoidable, amateur, unpretentious and naive. Listening is a learned skill, selective, focused, concentrated, biased, snobbish and rare. We all become adept at tuning out sound because it is everywhere and unstoppable. But we are only ignoring it: it is still there. As part of my artistic practice I have tried to unlearn how to block sounds out, to notice it all, to become an aural sponge, to catalogue it all in my brain. I want to have sonic experiences consciously retrievable at any instant. It's going well, thanks, except for one thing. I can't sleep.

## SILENCE IS GOLDEN ...

I dream of silence. I wish I dreamt in silence, and to get to sleep I need silence. Sleep requires a kind of withdrawal from the world, a psychological, cerebral, mental return to the womb, where one is surrounded by the warmth and comfort of the sounds of mother's bodily functions heard from the inside. The outside world is *literally* outside – and it sounds like it too. So as I close the curtains, turn out the light and close my eyes to remove visual stimuli, I wear earplugs. Yet it is not the same as the black blankness of the insides of my eyelids. In actual fact I am turning up the volume of my own body and causing the rest of the world to sound 'outside'. This brings an immediate feeling of being in an imagined womb, and consequently ushers in easy sleep. The technical definition of 'silence' is an absence of sound, but actual silence in the acoustic world is the sound buried beneath a floor of white noise. It is this noise that helps me sleep. In the recording world, it is also the same kind of ambience labelled the 'noise floor' – that humming nothing you get when you use a microphone to record a silent space and then in playback turn up the volume to extreme levels. This is the kind of silence that helps me sleep – a very, very loud silence, so loud it becomes noise.

Of course, the ears do not stop receiving sounds just because one is asleep. Experiments have been carried out where a sleeping person has particular sounds directed at them to see if the content of their dreams can be affected by external factors. Not surprisingly, results were inconclusive, but the example of the subject who reported dreaming of rain after sleeping to the sound of running water simply proves that our ears and our brains still hear the outside world. What I'm trying to figure out is, when I dream about my perfect woman calling my name, am I dreaming of the sound of her voice, of the sounds her vocal chords make as her mouth and tongue shape that particular word, or of her speech in a particular sonic space with particular acoustic qualities? Or am I just imagining/remembering the content of her communication? Perhaps what I really want to know is this: do we dream of sound, or do we dream in sound? And if we don't dream in sound, do we therefore dream in silence?

## SILENCE DOESN'T EXIST ...

'Yes it does!' cries a voice at the back: 'space is silent!' Okay smart arse, get yourself out into space and tell me what you hear. Surprise, surprise! Composer John Cage discovered the very same when, in an attempt to experience silence, he stepped into an anechoic chamber only to have his head filled with the sound of his own blood rushing through his veins, his pulse beating out the time of his personal biorhythmic concerto. Cage's famous piece 4'33", consisting of a seated pianist not making a sound for precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds, is all about the non-existence of silence. (Cage composed the piece with notes – '... actual notes, but they are all silent. The duration of the notes amounting to the time 4'33".') The sounds of the auditorium and the incidental sounds of life all become the piece of music. But that was 1959. Nowadays, you just have to listen to a blank cassette.

## SILENCE IS NOT TO BE PURSUED ...

Everyone keeps complaining about noise. The music is too loud; movies are too noisy; the streets are a riot of sound; the city is oppressively noisy; blah blah blah. There's something else going on here other than the quest for quiet. This is all about the invasion of sound, especially sound made by people, other people, people I don't want to have to care about, that I don't want to have to hear, damn it! So we all head to the hills for a little peace and quiet. Well I'm sorry, no truly I am, but the country is not quiet. It is so noisy it is painful. The Australian bush, so idealised by the urban majority, is raucous. I for one find anything more than fifteen minutes of that shrill, glissando of insects unbearably grating! This idea that 'peace' goes hand in hand with 'quiet' is just fantasy.

If ever you are walking through the bush and it goes quiet – not just what you think is quiet, but actual quiet – then stop. Do not move. Put all your senses on alert, especially your ears, just as all the other creatures have ... now, is that peaceful enough for you? Relax. It's probably just you and your noisy invasion that has caused the bush to go still with listening. It is this notion of sonic invasion that I suspect is partly behind the drive to rid Melbourne's Botanic Gardens of fruit bats. Sure, they're having a good go at destroying the place, but really it's the fact that they're such rowdy buggers that irks people. But how can anyone enjoy the peace and quiet of a garden in the middle of a major city? How ironic, then, that last summer one of those 'Shakespeare in the Park' performances was drowned out by a loud social function nearby, with the audience and performers alike up in arms. No wonder the bats take off over the river each night. They too need their 'peace and quiet'.

## LISTENING TO THE MEDIA ...

Of course, you can fake silence. Media (as in reproductive media, as in media arts) is the best realm for making/faking silence. Despite the conservative claims that movie music is too noisy, both movies and music love to use silence. It marks out time and space; it punctuates and accentuates; it builds tension and dissolves it; it is a malleable and a powerful piece of material in an artist's hands. Inversely, radio and TV abhor silence. Extraordinary lengths are taken to avoid, shun, and banish silence. On radio, music tracks are played end-to-end, often cross-fading over one another, only fading out momentarily as commercials are squeezed bombastically into spaces barely big enough for their raucous trumpeting. Announcers talk as if held at gunpoint, threatened with violence if they pause for any longer than it takes to take a breath – preferably a noisy one.

Similar things happen on television; except that you have something pretty to look at when your ears need a break. Even when 'technical difficulties' cause a break in the sonic continuum, you might get a hapless talking head, obliviously smiling at you and soundlessly chattering away, signifying the production of sound, if not the real thing. You don't need to hear the director swearing at his minions as they try to 'restore sound transmission' – you can feel his wrath just by watching the face of the poor presenter being relayed the news that their last, oh-so important words, have been lost on their devoted audience.

## WATCHING BIG BROTHER IS LISTENING ...

An interesting battle with silence on television can be found on the current reality game show 'Big Brother'. Initially I was quite excited by the prospect of a multi-microphone studio set-up, with improvised performance (i.e. 'real people') broadcast live, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I thought of Robert Altman's *California Split* (1974), where multiple microphone sources picking up the voices of the actors were mixed 'live' to multi-track tape as the performances happened. These performances were improvised around a loose script, with people talking over each other rapidly, sometimes incoherently, often meaninglessly. I was interested to see how the sound crew working on Big Brother would choose which mikes at which times, and what effects might be generated by their selection.

To my slight disappointment, the sound of 'Big Brother' is provided entirely by contact mikes attached to the neck of each housemate, with rules stipulating that the mike must be worn at all times except when sleeping. This makes sense in a soap opera, where the characters' dialogue drives the action. Still, this does provide some technical headaches when everyone is talking at once, and there have been numerous occasions when the televised show has had to resort to subtitles (usually when people are whispering). Yet some interesting sonic moments do happen if you listen for them, such as when one particular character goes into the bathroom alone, talking to herself (presumably a habit highly valued by the producers). The sound of her voice is overly intimate – uncomfortably so, as if she is sitting right in your ear as she mutters away – while the sounds of her hands on the taps and the running water are weirdly distant, almost evoking that womb-like sonic state. Of course, when the focus is on people talking to each other, these moments are few and far between. Yet moments remain when the only camera angle available isn't the best angle and you get this strange audiovisual sensation: I'm spying on this person hidden behind these obstacles, but I can hear them right in my ear.

Predictably, critics whine about the tacky, puerile, moronic feel of the show, but then these are probably the same people who think art-house cinema is about real people. Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1999) is the movie version of television's 'Big Brother', and is made for such people. Jim Carey's character never once picks his nose, curses another person, or jerks off (and presumably doesn't even think 'dirty' thoughts). And needless to say, the sound throughout that film is 'nice' and perfect, with every word audible to the television audience (without contact mikes) just like in real life too. Of course, one could argue that a film about a highly orchestrated, artificial television show (complete with music cues on demand courtesy of Philip Glass, presumably not playing himself) should be a clearly plastic, overly crafted, saccharine sweet movie. Except that the lovers of *The Truman Show* would probably not accept that the movie is in fact plastic and saccharine. So it stands to reason that in 'Big Brother' we should hear the painful sound of contact mikes being crushed as two characters hug, or the visceral, distorted crunch of fabric brushing over the microphone when someone takes off their shirt. It is not clean and neat; it is clumsy, rough, raw. Did someone say reality?

#### WATCHING MUSIC IS LISTENING ...

Perhaps this long-time denial of silence on television has contributed to the contemporary state of audio-visual culture. Maybe it is a sign of a change in audience expectation. For just as there is an assumption that if screen-based images have no sound then something is 'missing' or 'wrong', there is also a growing tendency to automatically add visuals to what were once strictly sonic events. On the 'new frontier' of electronic music, every second gig now has the obligatory VJ pumping out as many images as they can, almost as if in a race with the sound/music to reach the audience first. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for excessive audio-visual activity. What bothers me is the automatic and expected aspects of its presentation. Where has this urge come from? Is it a simple yearning for music-image? Is it located in the dissatisfaction with nerdy-looking button pushers on a stage, their act not 'visual' enough to accompany/explain/ render the sound?

My two-year-old is currently gripped by this very crisis of music-image. Although he has had music played to him from birth (before birth, in fact), and almost always via media (i.e. recorded sound through speakers), and even though he hasn't yet formed a notion of what is or isn't music in terms of content, he is still happiest when he can see something related to the emission of the sound. At home, the LED lights of the graphic equaliser pulsing up and down in sync with the sound captivate him and signify music. I quite like the LED lights too. They are exact yet abstract. They are the visual equivalent of the beeps and blips that are emitted by practically every domestic appliance in the home these days. They are simply lo-fi suggestions that something is happening without spelling it out, without mickey-mousing it to me. I don't want my ATM to talk to me. I just want it to beep away, signifying that I have pressed the button hard enough, without going into detail about exactly which button I pressed. I don't want to have my attention diverted from the sounds of the traffic behind me, the jet overhead, the schizophrenic bum in the gutter muttering at my feet. I don't want to be conned into thinking that the world is silent.



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