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**SHOPPING
MALL: MUZAK,
MISHEARING, AND
THE PRODUCTIVE
VOLATILITY OF
FEEDBACK**

*I'm all lost in the supermarket
I can no longer shop happily
I came in here for the special offer
A guaranteed personality*

—The Clash

... the landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of: instead, everything that happens is part of the landscape. There is no longer a sharp distinction between foreground and background.¹

—Brian Eno

How psychoacoustics and the history of modern shopping came to meet, producing smooth backdrops for distracted listening, to give way to ambient relations.

The potentiality for sound to act as building material finds expression in a variety of disciplines and within varied fields of science.

Notably, acoustic design as a profession maps out the behavior of sound phenomena in relation to architectural space. The work of acoustic design fundamentally aims to shape the movements of sound through space to either minimize excessive noise or disturbance or to harness the characteristics of specific sound phenomena to heighten the appreciation of their presence, as in the case of concert hall design. Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, in their detailed account of acoustics and aural architecture, examine the profession of acoustic design, locating points of contention and histories of acoustical experimentation. In a discussion on listening,

environments, Blesser and Salter suggest that an understanding of spatial acoustics can be viewed according to two perceptual processes—“modifying the direct sound to produce a primary sonic event with increased size and intensity, and creating a separate slave sonic event [secondary event] that is experienced as enveloping reverberation.”² Therefore, spatial acoustics generally addresses an existing or anticipated sound event (music, voice, ambient, etc.) while crafting architecture to converse with such event. It both accentuates the intensity or meaning of the primary event and also supports its spatial spread through a secondary event, that of reverberation, which carries forward the primary sounds further into space.

Aspects of sound phenomena, such as vibration, disturbing echo, and loudness are generally subdued by related architectural adjustments within acoustic design. This can be seen particularly within domestic and working environments. Understandably, the disturbing effects of sound to extend between apartments, either from appliances or from neighbors, has led to degrees of acoustical work, importantly in terms of sound insulation. Regulations throughout the UK require sound insulation against both airborne and impact sounds between walls, floors and stairs, stressing that these “shall have reasonable resistance to the transmission of sound.”³ When placed within the home, spatial acoustics shifts its focus from that of aesthetic pleasure or communicational clarity to health and safety.

In conjunction, a great deal of spatial and acoustical research has also occurred within the fields of music technology and electroacoustic composition, particularly with works that incorporate a dynamic sense for sonic movement. The manipulation and shaping of sound matter in the electronic studio often unfolds alongside questions of architecture and spatiality that when coupled to elements of music composition activate the ear in multidimensional ways. The psychoacoustic figures that arise through the integration of acoustical features with electronic sound have generated a history of sonic art that continues to expand and unfold in numerous ways. The legacies of electroacoustic music and sonic art since the 1950s still echo in

contemporary practices that put to use sonic-spatial understanding. Forms of current sound practice often incorporate or presuppose sensitivity to architecture, and to questions of locational sound in general, leading to an overall recognition of sound’s potent ability to act spatially. This has found additional application in the use of surround sound technology in cinema and home theater systems since the 1990s, making multichannel audio available for general use.

Extending this appreciation for sound and space, I want to turn to the shopping mall. The mall offers an extremely familiar yet also surprisingly complex instance of acoustic design that incorporates a number of sonic and spatial elements. From my perspective, the mall gives expression to an “ambient architecture” that, while being caught up within the verve of consumer culture writ large, utilizes the physiological and psychological dynamics of audition (among other sensorial events). It does so in turn by considering the specific locative conditions of a given architecture, forming a rather elaborate construction of sound and space. In this way, it offers a compelling point within the acoustic territories of everyday life, highlighting a history of spatial politics fully wed to sonic experience.

As space the mall is often open and reverberant, catering to a variety of public needs and interactions. In many cases, the mall acts as a central public space for local neighborhoods or regions for not only shopping, but importantly for gathering and for public involvement. Incorporating many entertainment facilities, the mall often provides a customer with an extraordinary range of activities. Thus, as an acoustical situation it is highly active and generally full of ambient sound that contains numerous elements. From play areas for children to food courts, dental facilities to fitness centers, the mall reverberates with a number of interactions set within a systematic structure of management. It organizes and caters to the sense for public meeting, acting as social center, hang out, and consumer fantasy all in one. Additionally, the mall incorporates an active presentation of electronic and recorded sound by way of extensive intercom and speaker systems, which generally amplify background music to

effectively contour the atmospheric shape of the mall. These amplifications aim to accentuate the fluidity of the mall experience by supporting a feeling for mobility and relaxation which shopping entails—customers should find the needed object or item without obstruction while also experiencing a feeling for consumer experimentation through browsing, trying on, imagining. The mall in this sense is deeply scripted and predetermined while relying on an architectural vocabulary of atmospheres and ambiances to which music and sound play a vital role.

In examining the mall, as an atmospheric, psychoacoustical public environment, I also want to consider the sonic figure of feedback. Whereas the driver in the car is situated within the potential range of vibratory sensing, the shopper in the mall is conditioned by an elaborate ambience designed to *give back* the image of one's desire. The shopper arrives in search of clothing, furniture, or electronic appliance from which fulfillment or satisfaction is partially gained or imagined. In this sense, the mall anticipates the desiring flows of the individual body, as a network of psycho-emotional force; it harnesses the energies of the shopper while returning such energies in the form of consumer delight and fulfillment. This *feedbacking* though operates as a volatile, tenuous effect, shifting according to so many fluctuating particles of production and consumption, as an enveloping mesh.

As a sonic energy, feedback is tenuously drawn out. It rises as a sonic thread, appearing between an electronic sound source, such as a microphone, and its amplification source, such as a loudspeaker, and their close proximity, to result in a looping, humming effect. Feedback is cause and effect united in a self-contained coupling, where an input gives an output that comes to influence the input again. This might be said to function as part of any system or production, shifting in degrees of positive and negative influence.

These operations of feedback also appear within studies of communication. In Barry Truax's important study on "acoustic communication" the author emphasizes the "feedback" of acoustic

information, which "is necessary for orientation, and in the most general sense, the awareness of self in relation to others."⁴ Feedback, as a communicational channel, affords an audible understanding for self and surrounding as they flow together, defining a positive channel for environmental sensitivity; feedback is a sort of registration of this acoustical interaction, indicating points of contact and connection as well as breakage and interruption. Feedback generates a locative sense for place and emplacement—how my own presence is an active participant within the larger acoustic ecology.

Engaging these understandings of feedback, the mall provides an environmental situation for exposing acoustical communication on a number of levels. In following these I wish to consider how the mall utilizes all the effective materiality of sensing to generate a production of subjectivity. Yet this production occurs through an unsteady balancing between flow and break, excitement and disappointment, giving way to a relational dynamic between body and surrounding, self and object. That is, the feedbacking found within mall life occurs as an unsteady flow of acoustical information and exchange, rising at times in acts of secret performance and falling at others in moments of mishearing. The mall is a scripted space that, in weaving together varying intensities, acoustically sounds out multiple routes within its seeming monotony.

The mall acts as a galvanizing container for a number of performances. Such performances both reinforce the view of mall culture as symptomatic of a general withdrawal of social values outside forms of consumerism, an anonymous and impersonal space of pure capital, while also spawning curiosity as to the greater weave of architectural effects. In approaching the mall within this study of everyday life, I linger within its corridors and shops so as to bring forward possibilities for reappraising often-negative understandings of mall culture. I wait for the next tune to play over its speaker systems while overhearing a conversation between a sales clerk and a customer on the current problems occurring within the local baseball league. From this perspective, the mall comes forward as an elaborate meeting point between a fully,

scripted acoustic and spatial design and the multiple forms of public experience occurring therein. In this regard, the mall can be viewed as a production that draws out the psychological and social effects of sound and audition arising from within a culture of management. Within this totalizing sonic experience, the movements of social bonds might also be heard, as a lateral or nested coordinate within the script of the mall. In this way, I want to also hold up the mall as a space that generates complex listening formed from the effects of background music *and* the productive ambiguities found in ambient architectures.

Muzak

In considering the mall as an acoustic territory, it is my aim to detect the movements of sound and music as they come to shape the spatial and social experience. For it is clear upon entering shopping malls that music is key to designing the particular environment. As Jonathan Sterne notes in his account of programmed music in the Mall of America, "music becomes a form of architecture. Rather than simply filling up an empty space, the music becomes part of the consistency of that space. The sound becomes a presence, and as that presence it becomes an essential part of the building's infrastructure."⁵ Thus, the shopping mall offers a dynamic account of a particular sonic architecture that has come to pervade so much of quotidian life. Yet, by listening in to the mall as a complex acoustical space, the trail of background music and the ambient din of shopping all point to a larger history related to consumerism, labor, and sound reproduction. Walking through the mall then is to participate in the here and now, as well as a lineage of sonic research and social history.

The psychological and physiological effects of music have been widely researched and documented as part of the history of industrialization within the Western world. Jerri A. Husch's study of music in the workplace provides a rich analysis of how music was taken up

within the larger industrial management culture of the early twentieth century. At the core of such history was a growing understanding of the relation between capitalist production and the health and mental state of the worker. "In other words, neither the machine, nor the mechanical mode of production could be stabilized and maintained until the social and psychological processes necessary to sustain them had been internalized by the workers."⁶ To aid in the process of internalization, the placement of music within the workplace became an operative ingredient. A dramatic rationalization was mounted to examine and define every aspect of the workplace, exemplified in Frederick W. Taylor's studies of time and motion, and his "scientific management" theory, which led to the design of production machinery based on the movements of the working body. Ideas of efficiency and production management were coupled with growing scientific examination on the vitality of the individual worker (which presented a deepening challenge to the growing industrial core of US and Europe at this time as seen in labor disputes and the development of the unions). The efficiency of production was increasingly understood to presuppose the comfort and standardized labor of the individual worker.

Locating music within the workplace gained credibility throughout the 1920s as psychologists increasingly entered the field of labor management, being hired to examine the space of work, the response of workers to various conditions, and the question of standardizing the movements of production, which had come to radically replace earlier forms of labor and a worker's relation to his/her craft. "It was agreed that the growth of purely mechanical and other routinized forms of labor had indeed diminished opportunities for self expression, but the effects of this loss were seen to be offset by the actions of business management in humanizing the work process."⁷

The development of Muzak in the early 1920s is radically linked to questions of the workplace, and the feverish reality of labor disputes and union aggression. Following the developments of radio and telephone technology, the possibility to wire in sound from a central

control led to a systematic appraisal of music's effect on labor and the psychology of the worker. It was found that the tasks of work could be better supported by providing background music in the workplace, giving workers an auditory frame through which bodily rhythms, the repetition of physical tasks, and the often monotonous passing of time could be eased.

The effects of music were generally recognized to increase metabolism, strengthen or modify mood, and importantly, to "increase not only the intensity of sudden effort, but also the duration of sustained effort and the power of renewing it."⁹ In addition, the rhythmical structure of songs was discovered to aid in the repetitive movements often found within modern work, and to reduce the sense of monotony experienced from such actions. The muscular expenditure of energy finds a literal source of support with the presence of music, giving subliminal nourishment to lessening the fatigue of the workday. In addition to supporting and easing fatigue, music had great effect on a worker's attention span. As Husch outlines, the early studies by Wyatt and Langdon (1939) conducted in England revealed an increase in production output with the insertion of music into the working environment. The sheer quantity of output rose as music allowed workers a sense of distraction to the banality of their surroundings, while also reducing the level of conversation occurring between workers.⁹

Such psychological and physiological tests continued well into the 1950s, often linked to military testing, where the question of alleviating undue stress and fatigue while increasing attention and productivity is key. With the development of Muzak (originally by Major General George O. Squier, a decorated veteran and then Chief Signal Officer of the United States Army), locating appropriate music within the workplace became a dynamic reality. Reorganized in 1934 as the Muzak Corporation, the company operated through the use of electrical cabling (later replaced by telephone wire), sending out programs of recorded classical compositions to workplaces. The light pattern of melodies, the recurring movement of soft rhythms, the forms of harmony accentuating song structures, all cradle up against

the body in the midst of work to aid in its efficient output. These psychological and physical effects were incorporated into the Muzak program, eventually leading to an extensive network of clients and musical repertoire aimed at specific spaces and work situations. As a Muzak researcher commented in the late 1940s:

Factors that distract attention—change of tempo, loud brasses, vocals—are eliminated. Orchestras of strings and woodwinds predominate, the tones blending with the surroundings as do proper colors in a room. The worker should be no more aware of the music than of good lighting. The rhythms, reaching him subconsciously, create a feeling of well-being and eliminate strain.¹⁰

Muzak was immediately understood as a form of "atmospheric architecture," conducting mood and behavior through sonic material. Yet Muzak's original relation to the workplace quickly shifted to other environments. Already by 1934 the company was installing their system in residential households, originally in the Cleveland area. By 1946 Muzak was heard in restaurants, offices, transit areas, factories and supermarkets, and eventually finding its way to the White House (in the 1950s), providing "functional music" to postwar America. Might Muzak's success be attributed not only to the demands of labor management, and the burgeoning industrial production of the early twentieth century, but also to the emergence of a domestic culture seeking stability against the malaise of the economic depression followed by the social intensities of the Second World War? If music has the ability to effect psychology, and to support the fatigue of physiological expenditure, can we hear Muzak as a form of environmental conditioning to aid in the general mood of the populace?

As Joseph Lanza has noted, Muzak also pervaded musical productions and sound culture throughout the 1950s and 1960s, leading to mood songs, elevator music, and an auditory diffusion of compositions for emotional life. "Along with Muzak and elevator

music, there is mood song to accompany our favorite movie scenes, tickle our subconscious fancies on television and radio commercials, alert us to the next network news station break, and lull us in our home entertainment centers."¹¹ Mood song appears in numerous media and situations, to effect a given experience through emotional and psychological intervention. Such sonic experience resituates our relation to figure and ground, foreground and background by operating on the peripheries of perception, and through conditioning the atmosphere of place, granting the design of space a dynamic psychoacoustic supplement. In this way, Muzak became an intensely sited production by understanding the listening body in relation to specific environments.

One dramatic location for the implementation of background music can be found in the shopping mall. Muzak has appeared as a material addition to mall architecture since the 1950s, pervading the vast and reverberant spaces with an extensive network of speaker systems to pipe in a controlled program of light tunes, versions of popular songs, and instrumental renditions of jazz classics. As Sterne further notes, music in the mall is key to scripting the architectural experience: "Programmed music can be said to territorialize the Mall: it builds and encloses the acoustical space, and manages the transitions from one location to another; it not only divides space, but also coordinates the relations among subdivisions."¹²

Muzak's scientific research, though initially arising in relation to the workplace, finds application within the spaces of consumption and the growing consumer culture of the 1950s. The psychological and physiological drama of the shopping body might in turn find support through a steady stream of music, programmed in relation to the architecture of the mall, and the ebb and flow of energy attached to the movements of spending.

Margaret Crawford has poignantly observed that the history of the mall incorporates a steady accumulation of architectural and spatial effects aimed at engaging the consumer. As she notes, the "Malling of America" from the 1960s to the 1980s radically shaped

the physical and social landscapes of the nation, aligning real estate interests, commercial production, and local economies with a culture of consumption often masked as "the demands of the consumer." As she queries, "If the world is understood through commodities, then personal identity depends on one's ability to compose a coherent self-image through the selection of a distinct personal set of commodities."¹³ From this perspective, the mall can be understood to fuel the manufacturing of desire. To do so, the mall structures its entire development and success according to the particular laws of consumption, which make an unsteady weave from the flows of capital and the flows of personal identity. Thus, the seeming banality of the mall can be read as a dynamic register of the meeting of the individual body and a fully scripted system of management. "As central institutions in the realm of consumption, shopping malls constantly restructure both products and behavior into new combinations that allow commodities to penetrate even further into daily life."¹⁴ To perform such combinations the mall balances "products and behavior" by providing tangible goods related to local demographics and lifestyles ("real needs"), as well as stimulating a prolonged fantasy of associated goods ("imagined needs")—that is, the mall gives comfort while always already unsettling one's sense of fulfillment; the mall satisfies immediate need while suggesting, through a perpetual presentation of associated goods, that one does not have everything.

To return to the notion of feedback, the mall instigates a level of feedback so as to loop the customer and the shopping condition together, weaving them into a psychodynamic structure. That is, as a customer one must find what is needed while at the same time be given additional input, as a constant production of lack aimed at the imagination. The mall draws out this need for more by balancing the feeling for harmonious mingling—*this jacket is perfect*—with an ever-so slight coming of change or rupture—*I'm sure there is something just ahead*. Consumerism interlocks a sense of completion and a feeling for desiring more. By locating such fluctuations within the

space of the mall it might be viewed as an architecture for the promotion of longing, housing the ongoing fantasy of possible identity while giving support to the mood swings of consumption.

The mall offers what Guy Debord termed “shimmering diversions” of capital made explicit in the architectural environment, which incorporates individual fantasy while mirroring back one’s own image as on the verge of collapse—the horizon of the mall, as an ambient spatiality perfumed by the tempo of musical form, holds steady the ever-new with the banalization of the always the same. The fragmentary nature of shopping—*of trying things on, of getting carried away, of wishing for more*—thus puts the shopper into a subdued frenzy, a desiring flow continually seeking fulfillment through what he or she sees and feels. Thus, the shopping mall is “calculated to organize the disorienting flux of attributes and needs” and to balance “the limited goods permitted by this logic and the unlimited desires released by this exchange.”¹⁵

Muzak’s initial program of quarter-hour music (15-minutes of music followed by 15-minutes of silence) was designed to support the worker, stimulating the energy expenditure of muscular movement and the fatigue of attention by specifically intervening within the time frame of production. Music could re-animate the expenditure of energy while silence could aid in reducing the monotony of a steady stream of information. Such a concentrated structure demarcates an acoustical horizon where one is conditioned by the appearance and disappearance of musical stimuli over time. Following Muzak into the space of the mall, we can identify how it comes to perform within the logic of consumerism by aiming to mollify the unsteady balance between “goods and behavior” and the labors enacted by the consuming body. From Frank Sinatra to the boy band Blue, the mood swings of shopping are anticipated in the shifting shades of musical textures.

Phil Kotler’s ideas of “store atmospherics” from the late 1960s draws early attention to the effective capability of lighting, crowding, music, and even scent, to induce various moods conducive to the experience of shopping.¹⁶ Store atmospherics give spatial conditioning,

creating degrees of comfort or stimulus, which also find parallel in the architectural ideas of Victor Gruen. An Austrian architect, Gruen immigrated to the US in the 1930s, along with many other architects, notably Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, and Marcel Breuer. Establishing himself in Manhattan as a leading store designer, a job many of his architectural colleagues viewed lowly, the story of Gruen is interwoven with the story of mall culture. His store designs for such shops as Barton’s, Ciro’s Jewelry of London, and Lederer de Paris, all located in the growing high-end retail section of 5th Avenue, revolutionized the notion of shopping. Drawing upon his Viennese roots, Gruen’s shop designs were based on elaborating the shop façade into an arcade where passersby could stroll into and absorb the extended glass display cases recessed into the walls before entering. The arcade became a site for the presentation of goods, turning them into museum displays replete with special lighting, mirrors, and elegant fabrics aimed at highlighting the uniqueness of the objects. “Employing innovative store layouts, brand-new materials, strategic lighting, and shocking façades, the partners [Gruen worked alongside Morris Ketchum] fashioned a retail experience that surrounded the viewer with glittering goods.”¹⁷

Gruen’s elaborate store designs thus aimed to create a retail experience, stimulating the shopper as a viewer and lending to the movements of consumerism a dynamic architectural backdrop. Such expressions though carried with them an innate sense of fantasy and desire. As Gruen commented in the early 1940s, “we want to influence emotional rather than rational powers.”¹⁸ The shop architecture was an illusionary space designed to stimulate and promote equally the goods for sale and a shopper’s curiosity. This led to a number of spatial effects, notably extending the shop out onto the street, or bringing the street into the shop to create a seamless effect.¹⁹

Gruen’s designs were notably commented upon, receiving praise for their innovative use of materials in creating retail experiences as well as being criticized for their apparent trickery. Lewis Mumford blasted Gruen’s designs as an “assault on the senses” that turned

architecture into “parlor pomp.”²⁰ Mumford’s criticisms were already out of touch with the emerging culture of consumerism that would lead to further assaults on the senses, shaping the built environment through a vocabulary of pure effect. Gruen’s early designs in Manhattan lent persuasively to future retail developments, providing a model for how to attract customers, and further, to profit from the increasing expansion of the real estate market that emerged alongside the American suburbs.²¹ Gruen’s architectural ideas were eventually replaced by pure economics. As he states, “Loans for buildings which are to be leased are based not on the structural soundness of the building but on the financial soundness of the tenants; not on the thoroughness of design detail but on the thoroughness of lease writing; not on the aesthetics of the structure but on the beauty of the financial statement.”²²

The work of Gruen runs parallel to the development of “store atmospherics” to signal a continuation of the psychological and physiological reach of Muzak in understanding the complex interweaving of muscular energy, personal desire, and economics. Muzak’s “stimulus progression program” participates in conditioning the atmospherics of shopping, where “All the familiar tricks of mall design—limited entrances, escalators placed only at the end of corridors, fountains and benches carefully positioned to entice shoppers into stores—control the flow of consumers through the numbingly repetitive corridors of shops.”²³ Music not only adds to the formal design of the mall, but interlocks with the energies of the shopper. This occurs through a number of effective musical dynamics, most notably, tempo and volume. For instance, Smith and Curnow’s “arousal hypothesis” (1966) examined how certain volume levels influence how much time shoppers spend in stores. It was discovered that louder music results in people spending less time in the shop, whereas softer music generally resulted in customers spending more time. “Arousing music” essentially made customers shop quicker. Tempo of music was further understood to function similarly to volume, with the quicker music stimulating a customer to move more

swiftly through a shop.²⁴ Such studies were even conducted to gauge how many bites a customer in a cafeteria takes during a meal—the faster the music, the faster the chewing. Yet, moving quickly through a shop does not necessarily result in a customer spending more—while it may help to stimulate a steady flow of shopping, it was also found that customers who shopped slower generally spent more money. Therefore, the dynamics of the shop must balance between customer flow and customer spending, resulting in a “stimulus progression” applied to spaces of consumption. Volume and tempo come to impress themselves upon the shopping body, as a contouring intervention onto the energy flows and expenditures, continually modulated so as to structure or contort the movements of spending.

Distracted Listening

Barry Truax takes note of how systems of electroacoustic audio have come to pervade the environments of everyday life. “In many situations, electroacoustic sound *imposes* its character on an environment because of its ability to dominate, both acoustically and psychologically.”²⁵ Muzak dramatically participates in such electroacoustic domination, and as Truax further observes, results in an environment becoming “a designed, artificial construct.”²⁶ In this case, the listener is located as a “consumer” of an auditory environment, which in the mall structures the aural sense through an electroacoustic system of audio dominance, resulting in a “distracted listening” experience. Such distractedness for Truax lessens our ability to discern environmental information, undermining the communicational feedback of self and surrounding as key to aural sensing.

Following this perspective, and the related effects and electroacoustic technologies, I want to also claim or insert an element of *ambiguity*—to shift the clear form of audition, which seems to hear in the mall a steady line of active auditory dominance. In contrast, or as a shadow, I want to reflect on Muzak and what other kinds of stories might be told from the mall experience.

Akin to Joseph Lanza's own positive appreciation for Muzak as participating within a more general history of music, I want to hear the mall also as an architectural situation in which an array of sonic experiences play a significant role. To do so, I draw upon Paul Carter's evocative essay, "Ambiguous Traces, Mishearing, and Auditory Space," which gives a compelling examination of the auditory through the theme of "ambiguity." Claiming that listening as a communicational channel incorporates the pleasures and potentiality inherent to ambiguity, Carter stakes out a productive territory in which mishearing opens audition up onto a rich process. As Carter states, "Listening, unlike hearing, values ambiguity, recognizing it as a communicational mechanism for creating new symbols and word senses . . ."27 The dynamics of listening unfold as a productive volume by explicitly "evolving out of ambiguity and mishearing," thereby retaining "these signs of what cannot be fully communicated."²⁸ Listening forms a dialogical activity, full of slippages; a set of maneuvers that in nurturing communicational clarity also incorporates all the subtle gradations, challenges, and misapprehensions of relating.

I want to adopt such productive mishearing in approaching the mall, so as to not only hear the drive of Muzak as a force of (negative) distracted listening, but also as a sonic materiality adding richness to the overall oscillations of place. As I've tried to map out here, Muzak uncovers a range of potentials for manipulating and engineering physical and emotional experiences. Yet such totalizing visions, when placed within the mall, also give rise to an unstable structure—surely within the balancing act of the mall, the flows of desiring and imagining contoured by the extravagant rendering of consumer production also generates an array of misguided information, prolonged agitation, tiredness, enthusiasm and other forms of distraction that I take as *positive and multiple*. The script of the mall is also prone to slippages, generating boring tedium as well as sudden flirtations, both of which supplement the directness of spending. These disarrayed experiences might be based on ignoring the humming of background sound altogether, or by finding pleasure in simply listening along.

To return to the model of feedback, the looping that occurs between self and surrounding is also a volatile thread of acoustical exchange—feedback is by nature a *wavering line*, in constant motion, and oscillating in a glissando that rises and falls according to the dynamics of proximity, air pressure, or outside influence. This wavering oscillation imparts an elemental dynamic to the exchange of self and surrounding, as a deeply significant flexibility, and on a communicational level must be heard to give way to moments of intimacy and mingling, or intense proximity, as well as alienation and estrangement. Feedback is relationally productive precisely by functioning as such a sensitive, tensing link prone to fluctuation.

A study by Bing Chen and Jian Kang of a shopping mall in Sheffield reveals that customers appreciated soft or quiet music as part of their surroundings. Interestingly, they discovered that the sounds of other people were the loudest in the mall, indicated by interviewees as the "most annoying."²⁹ Such a comment highlights the mall as an immense acoustical stream to which background music contributes while surprisingly providing an element of smoothness. As Jeffrey Hopkins further notes in his study of the West Edmonton Mega-Mall, "Although malls were originally hailed as a quiet retreat from the sonic congestion of downtown streets, sound levels in some mall corridors now, paradoxically, exceed those of a downtown city sidewalk."³⁰ In his empirical survey of the Mall, Hopkins further found that among "the 576 negative words used [in describing the Mall], the term with greatest frequency of occurrence was *noisy*."³¹

From such perspective, the soundscape of the mall could be heard to fulfill the generally negative view, of an environmental break that overwhelms the communicational feedbacking of self and surrounding. Yet, in a curious twist, Muzak and the field of programmed music comes to supply a sort of "masking" to the noise of the mall, brought forward on top of the many voices echoing throughout. Background music thus imparts a degree of security or relief from the contemporary crowded mall. Its recurring fluidity and repetitive stream provide a safety net to the otherwise noisy,

environment. In this way, the mall brings forward an elaborate input to the aural sense, which involves Muzak as a conditioning background woven into the increasingly noisy environment, to generate various anxieties as well as pleasures. In short, sound and music perform in multiple ways, suggesting the aural environment of the mall may not be as static, or as singular, as at times assumed.



IMAGE 17 South Coast Plaza, shopping mall in Orange County, California, 2009. Photo: the author.

In contrast to the notion that “listening is always listening for something,” Carter suggests that listening instead “respects the erotic power of ambiguity, the generative potential of a representation that exceeds every determination.”³² Therefore, listening should be appreciated not solely as a plentiful act locating the individual within the power of meaningful exchange. Rather, listening situates us within a relational frame whose focus, clarity, and directness are endlessly supplemented and displaced by the subtle pulses, mishearings, and fragmentary richness of relating. That is to say,

listening may be so intensely relational by operating as a *weak* model of subjectivity, to ultimately nurture more horizontal or distracted forms of experience.

From this perspective, I want to also highlight the background as participant within the model of mishearing: to overlay ambiguity upon the built environment so as to appreciate how the senses are always navigating through a spatial or geographic network of the present, and gaining multiple experiences, sensations, and knowledge from the *entire* social field. If audition and sound teach us how to engage omni-directionally, to find points of contact underground, at home, and on the street, then surely the renderings of Muzak, in supplying spaces of consumerism with material support, can be listened to as bringing into relief the background as an environmental feature, to add to the acoustical field of experience.

The thrust of mishearing comes to continually realign the feedbacking of self and surrounding; from primary to secondary events, from background to foreground, mishearing creates new points of contact. In Don Ihde’s *Listening and Voice*, the author sets out a compelling consideration of the significance of sound and its relational energy. In a section on language and listening, Ihde recognizes two polarized tendencies, crossing between a “Cartesian linguistics,” which locates meaning already in the word, as idea, and a purely “phenomenological listening,” which hears the word as fully embodied. On one side, language supersedes the physicality of the spoken, while on the other, meaning is found in the variations of embodiment. As he states, “The infection of a ‘dualism’ of the ‘body’ of language in abstract sounds with its presumed disembodied ‘soul’ of meanings pervades our very understanding of listening.”³³ In the midst of such dichotomy, between the abstract body and the meaningful soul, Ihde explores the fluctuations that displace or unfold the “center” of language. This center is thus buffered by two poles, what he calls “the near and the far.” Accordingly, the “near to language” is understood as *musical signifi-*

cance, and the "far to language" as *silence*. Between these poles, the act of listening continually oscillates, veering between the plenitude of musicality, as that sensorial richness of sound, and the sharp absence of silence. Through such consideration, Ihde underscores a dynamics to listening that are also co-productive of meaning: "Word does not stand alone but is present in a field of deployed meaning in which it is situated," suggesting that "what is said always carries with it what is present as unsaid."³⁴ Echoing Carter's appreciation for ambiguity, to listen then is to participate within a field of dynamic audibility, shifting from near to far, from abstract sounds to linguistic meaning, and from the said to the unsaid. This *geography of meaning* gives way to a range of experiences, of ways of relating, which ultimately underscores listening as an important means to "hear the *otherness* . . ."³⁵

Following these views on listening, the ear veers and slips, focuses and drifts; I follow your words, and at times, I grow distracted, by the sounds outside, by my own thinking. Rather than strictly occupy the clear channel, the center of language, to engage the primary spatial event, listening imparts meaningful experiences through a fluctuation of focus that brings one in and around the mass and verve of so much sonic materiality, of *otherness*. The audible spatiality of the near and the far endlessly shifts attention from what is in front to what is behind, bringing the abstract and the concrete, the said and the unsaid into fruitful contact.

Marking the background as participant within the full range of acoustical feedback, listening in the mall might be a *distracted form*, but distraction often uncovers a surprising array of thoughts and feelings, epiphanies and meanings. Distraction may act as a productive model for recognizing all that surrounds the primary event of sound—*to suddenly hear what is usually out of earshot*. It allows or nurtures the ability for one to appreciate the sounding environment in all its dimensional complexity. Distraction may in the end function as means for undoing the lines of scripted space, loosening our sense for performing within a given structure, and according to certain expectations; to exceed or to fall short of the assumed goal. To be distracted is potentially to be more human.

The production of background music, as I want to suggest, following my own course of distracted listening, may provide a key understanding onto the importance of the background, as participant within the production of effective input. Might Muzak be actually heard to uncover the background itself, as such a forceful and signifying elemental feature within the modern environment? And further, to introduce distraction also as a positive vocabulary for (un)scripting the self within social spaces? The background may stand as the very site for the nurturing of new contact, performing to draw out peripheral and minor energies, and to give residence to the overlooked. Muzak, and other ambient technologies (to which I will return), occupies the background precisely because it functions to generate or trigger new subjectivity.

Interestingly, background music may be set within the general electroacoustic developments of the twentieth century, as part of the sonic arts' involvement in spatiality.³⁶ The electronic and technological experiments conducted by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry in the studios in Paris in the 1950s find curious parallel in the work of Ray Conniff, an innovative arranger and composer associated with the Muzak Corporation. At Columbia Records in the late 1950s for instance, Conniff started to compose voices as part of the main orchestral instrumentation, scoring female voices alongside trumpets and soprano saxophone, and male voices with trombones. This led to his highly unique "ethereal" sound, with wordless voices mixed within the instrumentation. In addition, for his debut album, *S'Wonderful* in 1956, Conniff attempted to capture the reverb of an early church recording session by playing back each of the tracks from a speaker mounted at the bottom of a stairwell in the studios, and rerecording this up on the sixth floor. In doing so, Conniff created an airy interweave of voice and instrument to the point where the two indeterminate hover in dreamy unison. This compositional vision shifts the traditional view of voice appearing on top of instruments, leading to an early ambient sound bringing the background and foreground together, to elaborate what he understood as a core sensation to listening: "All I can say is that it's a sort of pulsing. The average persons, like to hear a pulsation, not obvious, but reassuringly there in the

background."³⁷ Conniff's particular use of voice and instrumentation was complemented by his interest in stereo recording techniques. This led to his innovative live stereo concerts in the late 1960s, utilizing a three-channel set-up to deliver a surround sound experience. Such sonic experiments and twisted spatialities open up a perspective on mall life that might begin to hear in this acoustic territory an actual promotion of listening. Though the mall at times is certainly a dreary place, its psychoacoustic project, the feedbacking dynamics, with the airy works of Conniff hovering in the background, along with all the energy flows found therein put into play much of sound's enveloping and effective verve.

Acoustic Politics

The mall forms a complex audible perspective. The perfuming of its corridors with sonic matter, in conjunction with the ambient din and social exchanges, give way to a politics of acoustic space, where decibels often exceed local ordinances, and the labor of listening is balanced between social integration and monetary expenditure. The mall then is an amalgamation of multiple economies, embodying an acoustical tension pitting vocal fatigue against background music, auditory advertising against the joys of listening, and the technologies of production against the technologies of consumption.

The legacy of Muzak has instigated more contemporary approaches toward scripting space acoustically. Audio branding and sonification are currently active design strategies dramatically participating in the total aestheticization and crafting of contemporary social space. From advertising jingles and sound logos for particular brands or companies to ringtones and sounds for gaming devices, as well as sonified weather reports, the play of sonic memory and auditory sensing are rapidly mobilizing much of Muzak's core ideas. Such a pervading development runs in tandem with the elaboration of global capitalist structures, with mobile and personal technologies opening the way for a myriad of new shopping encounters.

Such acoustic politics can be further glimpsed by investigating developments in recent audio technology. For instance, The Sonic Teenager Deterrent, or the Mosquito, has been installed in numerous shopping centers and pedestrian zones across Europe and the US. Designed to discourage loitering, the Mosquito sends out high-pitch frequencies, roughly around 16,000Hz, which mostly effects loitering teenagers—given that the range of hearing decreases with age, frequencies above 12,000Hz are often only heard by young listeners, turning the Mosquito into an anti-youth weapon. As the developer Howard Stapleton commented, "I got it so that only my kids hated it and my fiancé and I were completely unperturbed. We put up the prototype outside the [test] store and almost immediately people stopped congregating. The beauty of it is that the noise does not have to be loud, just pitched at the right level which affects teenagers."³⁸ Placed within shopping centers and pedestrian zones, such technology enables partial crowd control, dissuading loitering youth from blocking the flows of shoppers and disrupting the movements of buying within the mall.

Complementing Mosquito technology, the development of Whispering Windows technology has enabled the use of surfaces, such as large windows, to be turned into audio speakers. Manufactured by Etrema Products in Ames, Iowa, the technology is comprised of a small round transducer made from Terfonal-D alloy, a composite of rare alloys, which can be attached to flat surfaces and connected to an amplifier (operating through "magnetostriction" which is a property of magnetic materials that can change shape through magnetic transduction). The transducer essentially acts to sensitize the surface, making it vibrate up to 20,000 times per second and allowing it to function as an amplification surface.

These recent technologies extend the range of sonic effectiveness. As Steve Goodman provocatively suggests, "It could be argued, in fact, that Muzak pre-empted our submersion into a generalised surround sound culture, with the ambient purr of control and the digital modulation of affective tone that forms the ambience of

contemporary urbanisms.⁷³⁹ Thus, the amplification of a highly crafted melody by Ray Conniff swinging through the department stores, arranged as an elaborate psychoacoustic and multi-speaker event specific to the airy lightness of perfume counters, begins a steady electroacoustical conditioning of the everyday, leading to the contemporary flood of sonic pervasiveness.

The ability to transform storefront windows into sounding surfaces grants the retailer an additional outlet for attracting attention and drawing customers into the shop. Therefore, two acoustical signals occur, though running in opposite directions aid in the construction of consumer design and retail functionality. The Taylorist analysis of efficient production finds its complement in the contouring of the spaces of consumption with their own set of sonic tools designed to condition the shopping body, with the Mosquito forcing unwanted bodies out of the corridors and Whispering Windows inviting others in. Muzak thus finds expanded iteration in the form of whispering windows and mosquito signals, not to mention Surface Sound, a technology which enables any surface to be turned into a sounding zone. From here, the mall itself (and any other architectural surface or space) can be made a sensitive membrane for the conduction of electromagnetic signals.

The totalizing of the contemporary sound environment also brings with it counter-narratives designed to reinstate or thwart the complete occupation of public space by the directives of consumer culture. The collective Radio Ligna has generated a series of performative interventions designed to explore and open up public spaces to other forms of occupation. Founded in 1995 by media theorists and radio artists Ole Frahm, Michael Hüners, and Torsten Michaelsen, Ligna has worked to put into question prevailing structures of how public space becomes demarcated. Most notably, Ligna's work reveals the degrees to which commerce has come to condition the built environment, leading to a normalized sense for commercial interests and economic gain as defining factors for public interaction.



IMAGES 18 and 19 Ligna, Radio Ballet, Leipzig Central Station, 2003.
Photos: Eiko Grimberg.

As an example, their Radio Ballet from 2002 staged at the Hamburg railway station is a critical manifestation of Ligna's approach and strategy. Structured as a radio transmission of pre-recorded voice and sounds, the work invited listeners to participate in a series of unified actions and gestures to take place in the railway station at a designated time. Participants were asked to bring portable radios, and earphones, so as to tune into the radio broadcast while at the station, and to follow the instructions spoken by the broadcast voice. The performance essentially requested participants to occupy the station, appearing as an unidentified collective, and brought together through the invisible transmission, each participant listening and responding to the given instructions, which asked them to dance to music, to hold their hands as if begging, to lie down on the floor, to look up or to look down, etc. Through such actions, the Ballet was specifically designed against recent laws passed by the local government, which enable police to remove any person loitering in the station without purpose. The identifiable gestures of the loitering body were brought into play through the Ballet, from the homeless sleeping on the ground, the one begging for spare change, others just sitting or standing around—such bodily appearances were enacted as intentional yet ambiguous signs of criminality as an attempt to rupture their signifying meaning.

Ligna sought to point to and question the station as a now-privatized space, newly renovated to incorporate a shopping mall with stores, restaurants, and hotels. By integrating commercial shopping into the station, the city redesigned its legislation so as to appeal to businesses and to aid in controlling the station as a seemingly public environment. The insertion of the Radio Ballet, and its subsequent generative transmission, brought forward a tangible albeit undercover counter-narrative.

This strategy has also been applied in a number of performances designed for shopping malls. Staged since 2006, Ligna has sought to specifically address the space of the shopping mall, as a

“laboratory” for encouraging individual exploration. Their shopping mall interventions, also operating as covert radio transmissions, function on the threshold of the visible, with participants blending into the crowd and performing very simple, subtle gestures. For instance, their “Transient Radio Laboratory” in Liverpool was structured as a series of four “research modes,” namely, movement, speed, communication, and interior. Each mode functioned as means to intervene and tease out a performative rupture, operating as a “secret conspiracy against the normal behaviors in homogenized zones of consumption.”⁴⁰ By instigating a set of countermovements, Ligna sought to promote a subtle but palpable form of deviation—to enact a set of possible alterations on the “normal” functioning of the mall, as a space of subjective experience. Such gestures inevitably rubbed up against mall security, leading to a number of confrontations:

The next exercise was in “disturbing walking” by walking in slow motion. One of the securities took his chance and asked me, nearly standing, if I knew one of the other participants. I said no, I do not know her, hoping she had not said something else. The guy went back to his colleagues and after another short discussion he approached me again requesting that I should leave the shopping centre immediately.⁴¹

The Laboratory performed alongside the structures of surveillance, management, and coding at work within the mall. These systems actively control the mall, as a social space, delimiting modes of behavior while also supporting the integral pleasures needed to support the flows of the shopper. Again, the mall performs a constant balancing between too much and too little, seeking to harmonize the feedback of consumer culture—of *finding what one needs*.

A combat of signals might be heard to take place, between the effective architecture of consumerism replete with loudspeakers, whispering windows, and mosquito frequencies and the secret transmissions and social choreographies aimed at splitting the acoustical hold on the individual body. Ligna's work inserts a shift in spatial experience, carving out a zone for other forms of inhabitation and conduct—to appropriate or shift the given feedback. For Ligna, intentionally occupying the background becomes a route toward supplanting the invisible yet no less determining directives often defining public space.

Their work brings to mind the legacy of silent discos, which were designed as a means to have parties without disturbing local environments and neighbors with excessive noise. Through wireless headphone transmissions, people could dance to a private and shared music, leaving behind only the residual sounds of their own movements. Such technologies have subsequently been used for mass demonstrations, allowing the passing of information to go unheard by those outside the group. The wireless headphone then acts as support for organizational needs, spawning tactical potentials for maneuvering through given conflicts and subverting the omnipotent hold of scripted space. The secret transmissions of Ligna set in motion a series of rupturing background movements that, when choreographed into a sudden collective body, appear out of place, ambiguous, and suggestive. They both carve out possibilities for other behaviors while marking an identifiable break for those who witness, wonder, and stare perplexed at the disturbing walk or the raised arms of strangers.

Airports

The contemporary airport has come to also function or mirror the form and content of the shopping mall. As many contemporary airport developers have discovered, shopping is both an easy way to help travelers pass the time and a productive opportunity for generating revenue. Airports and shopping malls form part of the contemporary network of what Marc Augé has termed “non-places”—

those contemporary zones in which identity and social relations are relegated to a pure functionality within the “landscape-text” of travel, credit card exchanges, and duty free spaces, lending to the experiences of “super-modernity” where “the only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard, in the silent dialogue [the traveler] holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of a solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others.”⁴²

In contrast to place, non-place is thus a condition of super-anonymity, where identity is replaced by passport numbers and digital read outs, leading to a landscape of chain stores and controlled movement. Yet non-place and place intertwine as polarities, each invading the other according to a greater choreography of social interaction and event. Thus, within the space of the airport sudden exchanges may take place that become personal while the familiar streets of one's neighborhood are suddenly infiltrated by a corporate design found throughout the country. For Augé though, what may mark our contemporary experience is the intensification of the non-place, as a growing coordinate dotting the landscape, and feeding experiences of common space.

Such hyper-depictions, of solitude and the terror of codified space, though might not be entirely dichotomous with more personal experiences of place. Arjun Appadurai equally explores these contemporary movements and intensifications amplified in the networks of global marketing that unsettle identity, place, and history in favor of a smooth, codified, and super-modern mechanics. Yet what surfaces in Appadurai's thinking is a sensitivity to not so much the oppositional or dichotomous accents inflecting place from non-place, that overarching and gripping solitude, but the co-productive ways in which contemporary cultures slip in and out of such spaces. “Thus, to put it summarily, electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination.” The “work of the imagination” forms a relational dynamic, which is

“neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their practices of the modern.”⁴³

In following the reverberant acoustics of the shopping mall, my attention has been turned to the history of Muzak, and the defining research that came to mark the background of modern society with a set of deeply codified sounds. It has been my intention to undo the often-negative or singular understanding of these sounds. Rather, to hear in background music a larger understanding of sound, music, and audition that might operate as a “work of the imagination,” figuring the flows of a global, corporate sound in tandem with local nuance and experience—to carve out within the spaces of consumerism a productive break for supporting other practices of listening. These practices—from Ligna’s radio ballets to the distractions promoted by Muzak—suggest a more productive means for recognizing the auditory slippages and ambiguities that surface from within the systems of the super-modern: though Muzak may fill our ears with highly designed acoustical matter, it may also participate in the auditory cultures of the contemporary that generate surprising moments of juxtaposition and fantasy. (Recently, at the South Coast Plaza Mall in Southern California, a competition was held to see who could identify sounds found in the Mall. From the fountain on the first floor to the sounds of Abercrombie & Fitch, contestants were provided with audio recordings through the Mall’s blog and asked to send in their answers. Sponsored by the Mall, the competition suggests a light-hearted reflection upon its own acoustical spaces, and an appreciation for its visitor’s listening experience.)

The local and the global, place and non-place, thus form a continual process of exchange and mutation further echoed in Michael Taussig’s anthropological narratives through which he locates “the magic of the state.”⁴⁴ For Taussig, the general “fetishization” inherent to capital delivers in turn a matrix for surprising appropriations,

counter-narratives, and supplementary energies often running parallel to the very systems they seem to oppose. That is, the “magic of the state” is both its ability to disguise capital for need, while charging the desiring flows of bodies and imaginations with generative force. It is thus *through* the very forms and mechanism’s opened up by global production and consumption that one may also locate forms of appropriation, personal narrative, and sharing. Overlaying such ideas onto the mall, riveting its corridors with the work of the imagination, and filling its food courts with the magic of the state, the ongoing humdrum of the shopping spree may shift the flows of feedbacking energy into a channel for multiple projects.

To return to the airport, that space of vagueness and boredom, of the super-modern, we hear again the pervading trickle of background music mixing with a reverberant bed of acoustical events. The space and conditions of the airport recall the shopping mall by locating the traveler in a maze of consumer opportunities that run parallel to architectural elements producing ambient effects.

At the Oslo airport in Norway, the condition of the traveler gliding through the non-place of transit is also addressed through the permanent installation of “sound showers.” Produced by the artist and engineer team Anna Karin Rynander and Per-Olof Sandberg, the showers were installed at the airport in 1998 and allow a visitor to stand underneath a parabolic speaker and listen to a series of sound scenarios. The eleven showers are located through the main concourse, distributed as points of relaxation to the waiting traveler. Stepping into one of the showers triggers the playback of audio, enveloping the listener in a disjunctive sonic environment that contrasts sharply with the sounds of the airport in general. Sounds of waves, birds, giggling babies, or stories whispered by selected individuals feature as counterpoints to the tensions often derived from travel. As the work suggests, a “sound shower” might function as a cleansing opportunity for the individual traveler, a secret rupture within the frictions and exhaustion experienced while waiting at the airport— essentially as a *form of distraction*.

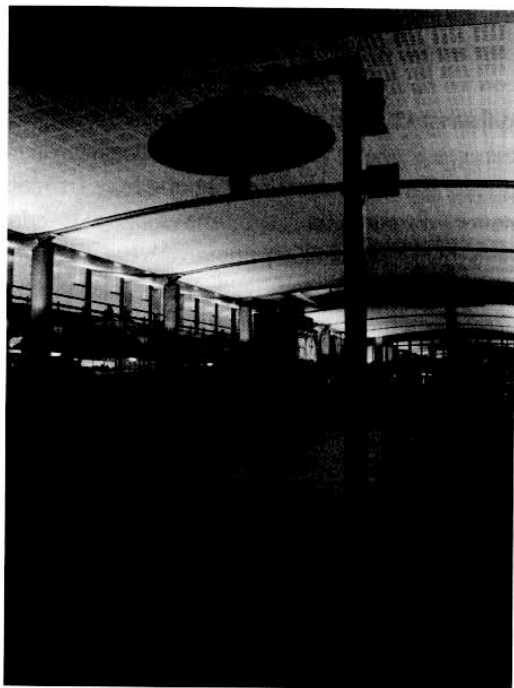


IMAGE 20 Anna Karin Rynander and Per-Olof Sandberg, Sound Showers, Oslo airport, installed 1998. Photo: the author.

In contrast to the directives of Muzak, the sound showers aim not to generate a light yet influential background for the spirit of shopping, or a musical structure to support the productive actions of workers. Rather, the shower uses sound as a counterbalance or spatial break within the often-linear movements of travel and the long stretches of waiting. The sound shower might be a form of sonic therapy suggesting other ways for sound to be installed in public spaces, where it acts as private or secluded enclave. Yet sonically the shower seems to in turn draw upon stereotypical motifs of pleasurable or appealing sound. From baby sounds to ocean waves, bird calls

and whispering voices, the poetics of the Oslo showers run parallel to the sonic palette of Muzak by appealing to a notion of the common public: no challenging or provocative sound, or dynamic range of frequencies. Though this does not belittle the presence and opportunity the showers present, it may remind our listening habits of the difficulty raised when locating sound in public—to negotiate the line between provoking the ear with stimulating audio material and avoiding the level of noise to which public space remains sensitive. How might one open the ears of the public, as many sound artists and projects seem to aspire, without relying upon an existing aesthetic vocabulary that can only follow in the tracks of an already scripted pleasure?

Such a question may find preliminary answer in the developments of ambient and generative music. As Joseph Lanza points out, particular forms of avant-garde musical aesthetics often aim for the background, as a dynamic and generative location for sonorous presentation. From Erik Satie's "furniture music" to Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*, composing work for the background shifts musical structures and materiality to another level of attention: to occupy the background, to function within the ambient details of audibility, demands a softer, less tense, and more horizontal form of composition and sound. Ambient music is thus a sound aimed at subliminal hearing, where, in the case of the airport, it slides into the ears of the semi-conscious traveler to lightly stimulate or relax the imagination. By extension, generative music, based on random looping of independent tracks, or algorithmic systems drawing upon a database of sounds, creates a bed or weave of sounds whose relations never repeat in the same pattern. Such work greatly extends the ambient project by in turn operating as spatial installations. For instance, Arne Nordheim's permanent installation, *Gilde på Gløshaugen* (2000), located in the Science Faculty Building of The Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway, creates an alteration of the public environment while fully operating within its given functionality. The work is essentially a 24-channel audio system,

mounted throughout the open hallways and atriums of the building, amplifying a database of composed sounds according to different live parameters, such as the amount of people in the building, or weather and light conditions outside.⁴⁵ Through digital sensing and computerized systems, the installation generates a continual sonic atmosphere, blending with the existing soundscape and environment.

Might ambient and generative music chart out a *magic of the state* by operating well within the movements of technology and consumption, and in doing so, to uncover potentialities in mystifying spaces of public interaction with a set of imaginary coordinates? In listening to *Music for Airports* (1978) the ear inevitably drifts toward a zone of ambiguity, where the free-floating tonalities supported by the gliding of smooth voices push the listener onto another level of attention—away from *listening for something* and toward reverie, fantasy, and distraction, as a listening that remains open and prone to wandering. Nordheim's sonic infiltration of the University building also delivers subtle input into the comings and goings of students, offering momentary distraction while functioning within the found structures and parameters of the educational institute. This poetics of distraction seems to suggest alternative itineraries for inhabiting space in which the feedbacking of self and surrounding becomes concrete; like Muzak, such work flirts with influencing the emotional and psychological state of the public, while in contrast seeking to challenge the overly-determined conditioning of the built environment. From Ligna's mall actions to an ambient aesthetic of sound showers and musical overlays, the undoing of the strict distinctions of figure and ground, back to fore, aims for a distracted subjectivity that might productively find new points of contact and alternative narrative within scripted space.

Atmospheres

The history of architecture intertwines with a history of the senses. As built forms have evolved and developed through history, the particular

experiences of embodied presence might be said to shift accordingly. The expressions of architecture, in signaling particular cultural beliefs, press back upon the experiences of individuals a conditioning structure that surrounds the senses as effective input. The built environment, in giving form to a cultural system also receives sensual input emanating from those who put to use a given architecture. Such a process can be appreciated as supplementing the understanding of architecture with the *experiential* and the continual process of sensorial energy and involvement that follows. As Peter Zumthor suggests, "If a work of architecture speaks only of contemporary trends and sophisticated visions without triggering vibrations in its place, this work is not anchored in its site, and I miss the specific gravity of the ground it stands on."⁴⁶ The vibratory gravity of a site, as a poetical image, points to a sense for not so much the identifiable, primary elements of a place—I like those windows—but rather an atmospheric and suggestive energy pervading a place, as a sort of secondary, reverberant texturing.

Notions of the *event* of architecture awakens the perception of the built environment to this performative unfolding every body and building come to enact. This must be emphasized as a dialogue passing back and forth on multiple levels, and bringing into its weave a network of associated systems, practices, and histories. Architecture is thus a technology *and* a living system pushing and pulling under the dynamics of multiple forces, thereby reflecting the radical energies and ideas that play out as the social and political. From this perspective, architecture might be appreciated more as an *atmospheric pressure* modulated by visible and invisible forces—a kind of weather effected by and causing effect onto the everyday. As Jean-Paul Thibaud suggests through the theme of "ambience," "Each ambience involves a specific mood expressed in the material presence of things and embodied in the way of being of city dwellers. Thus, ambience is both subjective and objective: it involves the lived experience of people as well as the built environment of the place."⁴⁷ Through such a perspective, sensing the built environment involves

an array of experiences, feelings, and qualities that shift through the temporal and seemingly immaterial registers of the everyday.

In addressing the mall as a sounding architecture, I've wanted to underscore listening as a highly active component. In doing so, the effective influence sonic experiences come to enact is brought forward in dramatic ways, drawing out the ambience of place inflected by a psychodynamic accent. To uncover this drama, my own listening has sought to not only follow in the well-tread lines of the schizophrenic argument, of a *Moozack* that aggressively infringes on "freedom" by manipulating the senses.⁴⁹ Rather, by introducing ambiguity into the equation, and letting the ear *mishear*, I hope to accentuate background music as one of many auditory experiences through which we still may learn to listen.

As a physical and spatial movement, sound carries a collection of information related to the conditions of the original object or body, the source of sound, along with the related environment. It creates what Truax refers to as a "feedback" of acoustic information. Yet, as a communicative medium sound carries information that is inherently temporal and evanescent—it can only communicate by always already disappearing *into* the environment. It thus supplies communication with a vital medium—to *truly hear the world and each other*—while unsettling signification with instability—to *listen is to also confront the voluptuous richness of ambiguity*. In this regard, "feedback" is a continual process that teeters on the line to becoming noise or to tapering into silence—it rises and falls in intensity according to the near and the far of audible events, building spaces of intimacy and distraction, togetherness and dislocation. Such a communicational model vitally introduces a relation of self to others that is not necessarily harmonious or steady, but full of continual negotiation and surprise—and which may introduce into the scripting of audible spaces an ever-present shadow.

6

SKY: RADIO, SPATIAL URBANISM, AND CULTURES OF TRANSMISSION