



Noisemaker[s]

Daniel Olson

SEPTEMBER 8 - OCTOBER 1, 1999

Marla Hlady Lewis deSoto Colette Urban

OCTOBER 8 - 29, 1999

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CURATED BY BARBARA FISCHER

Blackwood Gallery, UTM

“Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.”

Jacques Attali

The meaning of “noise” is as complex as its history in music. We use the word for too many things – for barely audible rustlings, for something that startles us, or for large and complex sonic phenomena. It describes annoying, grating or interfering sounds and those that have deadly force. It pops up when things are too loud: the neighbours cry “noise-pollution” and the cops are called to the rave. At the airport the fluctuating decibel levels of incoming and outgoing airplanes register on large, back-lit aerial photographs. “Noise-managers” keep the level below fifty-seven decibels most of the time, as this is understood to be tolerable for the surrounding bedroom communities.

At the other end of that spectrum, we need noise – at the BBC a special noise machine is ordered in to play “mutter,” taped chit-chat to counter the so-called “pin-drop syndrome.”¹ In Toronto writer Russel Smith’s novel *Noise* the protagonist is shaking from the dead quiet of his own doing – having got rid of his noisy neighbours. He finds the “blackest” cover amongst his CDs and throws on *Hostilator X, the Vacuum Mixes* before he is able to sit down and write.²

Taking shape as wanted and unwanted interference with univocal communication, noise is the too much and the not enough, the extraordinarily odd and the quotidian banal – it is the excess in and of sound.

Even within the realm of music it takes such random turns in meaning. The 19th-century scientist Hermann von Helmholtz, attempting to clarify the difference between noise and musical tones, suggested that tones strike the ear as “perfectly undisturbed, uniform sound” with no alternation of any of its various kinds of constituents. Noise, on the other hand, consists of “rapid, irregular, but distinctly perceptible alternations of various kinds of sounds, which crop up fitfully.” He summarized, “the sensation of a musical tone is due to a rapid periodic motion of the sonorous body; the sensation of a noise to non-periodic motions.”³ In the history of the avant-garde and popular culture, however, these definitions are hardly descriptive of either – music is repeatedly perceived as noise, just as noise is deliberately drawn into the orbit of music. Music embraces the complexity of noise, and even the noise in silence is musicalized, as we can see from Luigi Russolo’s 1913 Futurist manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, and John Cage’s silent piece *4’ 33”* (1952).⁴

For the French theorist Jacques Attali, therefore, all music can be defined as noise given form according to a code. What we accept as music are those few noises that are normalized, that are seen fit and finally authorized in a canon. An inextricable part of struggle and revolution, noise does violence to a particular existing order (of music). Noises signify disorder, weapon, blasphemy, the senseless; but they are “*prophetic* because they create new orders, unstable and changing.”⁵ Heralding new forms of pleasure and potentially new forms of power, noise is “the new syntax” as seen from the point of view of the existing syntax (or music).⁶

“Noisemaker(s)” at the Blackwood Gallery was a two-part exhibition focusing on the eruption of noise in visual art – where its context is less an existing order of music and more an existing framework of seeing. The works of Lewis deSoto, Colette Urban, Marla Hlady and Daniel Olson all draw attention to a very particular, stripped-down yet in itself complex and multi-layered auditory phenomenon, one whose place is commonly allocated to the realm of noise – a V8 engine in Lewis deSoto's *The Sound of the Trumpet*; exploding toy-gun caps in Colette Urban's *Round Peg in a Square Hole*; and children's toys in Marla Hlady's *Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars* and in Daniel Olson's *White Trash and Noisemaker*. Stretched into demanding length, held in an insistent intense proximity, an un-regarded noise is shifted, like a ready-made, into the context of aesthetic attention, where it appears as previously heard but perhaps not yet listened to sound material: rhythms, textures and affective power. Instead of choosing the form of concert – with active performer(s) and seated audience – these artists' works are located in a spatial context. The works play empirically and conceptually at once with the social power of noise, the way in which it compels puzzlement and curiosity and its disruptive and expressive effects. Fiercely focused, channeled, measured and framed, these works joy-ride on the testing beauty of a particular found sound, and thereby draw us into the orbit of the unsettled, rebellious and exhilarating places of our culture.



Marie Hlady, *Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars*, 1999



detail

Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars

When looking at Marla Hlady's *Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars* (1999), the resemblance of her two toy performers to the singular performer in Colette Urban's trailer unit is as striking as it is uncanny.

Consisting of two white cubes on legs with wheels, the sculptural components of *Drumming* are suggestive of the minimalist box – including in particular Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* – though Hlady's are much less abstract and univocal in design and function. More akin to an organ-donor refrigeration unit or to containers used to transport some deadly virus or monkey-ass stuff that's going to breed and put us under, Hlady's boxes are made specifically to silence the noise that's produced inside of them. Control-units! Heavily sealed, intensely insulated, with glazed plates allowing us to peek in, the two boxes each contain the stripped metal mechanisms of one drummer toy engaged in a serious workout, with periodic intermissions.

If the drummers are the bionic counterpart to Colette Urban's tap-dancing legs, the noise they make is displaced – unlike Urban's strikes, which are immediate in their effect even as they are muted on the side of the listener by the ear plugs that she provides. Of Marla Hlady's toy drummers we hear nothing directly; instead, we get "bottled up noise," drumming that escapes from tiny speakers placed under upside-down glass jars standing slightly off the ground on wire legs – four jars attached to each box. Thus displaced, compressed, funneled and variegated, noise is transmuted by conditions placed upon it through sculptural and technological means. Here, as Attali would perhaps suggest, violence is sublimated into the realm of music, that is, into the realm of the concert, the performance of a duet.

This is not to say, however, that we are in the realm of music as understood by Theodor Adorno, as a "promise of reconciliation" or as Attali further elaborates, as pure order that "always serves to affirm that society is possible."¹⁶ Hlady's duo, impersonated by toys, plays with the anticipation of such – with the idea of playing together in synchronicity and in tune with each other. But in actuality we encounter the opposite. The two individual toys never reconcile. The speed, rhythm and duration of each drummer is programmed separately and for random performance. Thus, the sound we hear is split into two carrying voices – nearly a fugue but without the octaval displacement between them. The effect is anthropomorphic: we see a couple performing a tragicomedy of communication. From time to time, each on his/her own concentrated rhythm, they appear to be talking incessantly to each other at the same time, as if emitting intensely important speeches. At other times they fall silent together – as if to rest, contemplate and get ready for a new start. Then again, the

slow tocking rhythm of one seems to trigger a torrent from the other, or vice versa, until in an odd moment they tock together in temporary tandem.

If the picture is one of individualized competition, it is in fact more complicated. Each score, though originally performed inside the box, comes up in an instant form as four individual, distinct interpretations, mutated by the differently sized jam jars. As the original is inaudible, its simulcast of electronic interpretations abound. In the end, the auditory experience is much less dystopian than it might initially seem – there is a sense that the condition of being heard, in the present-day code of creativity, is one of making noise, noise that hopefully attracts or otherwise outperforms the noises that others make. Hearing *Drumming* is rather more the intensification of listening to the periodized simultaneity of differences, an intensification of following several lines of auditory interest. Furthermore, if the jars themselves can be understood as types of listeners inflecting and amplifying the code of a transmitted message, then Marla Hlady's piece also provides an acoustic model for the displacement that is the act of hearing; the always already-present inflection that transmutes any message, that renders non-identical its very transmission. Her work tunes our ears to the noise that is in the listening.