

What Constitutes Silence?

Blanca Bercial

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What Constitutes Silence? A Dialogue between Theory and Thoughts

Blanca Bercial

I came to San Francisco in 2018. The first sound that got my attention were the sirens, a constant reminder of alarm. The second, was the desire for silence; a myriad of headphones covering people's heads.

Using audio technologies, we can advocate for individually curated soundscapes where we personalize our own sonic experiences. These individualized soundscapes offer a future of sound-proof hygienic sonic public spaces, where transactions between each other aspire to be unheard—perhaps, because sound transactions between one another in the shared space could potentially disrupt our individual productivity. Tied to others' actions by the different sounds around us, we are connected in a sonic network in which we never stop hearing. Yet the desire to not listen to others is one we can fulfill by immersing ourselves in our own soundscapes.

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Many theorists have defined noise as unwanted sound. The electroacoustic music composer Darren Copeland argues that “noise is more than just unwanted sound. Noise is also the total occupation of one’s consciousness from an unexpected, and certainly uninvited, external sound source.”¹

What is meant to be “unexpected” and “unwanted” in a certain place and how does this manifest through sound?

Leaving aside noise as an unwanted disturbance in an electrical signal, sometimes noise is sound with negative semantic associations. In 1913, noise was a symbol of the futurists. In 1977, social theorist Jacques Attali questioned the politics of noise and silence and argued that “since noise is the source of power, power has always listened to it with fascination.”² Attali claimed that noise “indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard within it.”³ From this statement we can deduce that noise allows us to be heard and consequently is a source of power. And if

noise is listened to by those in power, the act of listening becomes authoritative. If those in power that listen to noise with fascination, decide to silence it, this action is also a manifestation of dominance. Consequently, is power silent or noisy? Should we listen to noise or to silence?

Exercising power is in itself about listening.

The names we impose on sound, such as silence and noise, represent ideologies, sensory experiences, and negotiated meanings. Silence has also been mistakenly referred to as “silence,” mainly because it is composed of sounds we ignore.

How do sounds configure us as subjects in society?

In the field of acoustic ecology and listening sensibilities there is always the question of how the act of listening engages us and activates the world. But I also question how the act of listening can have the opposite reaction—not listening—when sounds are considered noisy, uncomfortable, and loud.

Can listening disengage us from each other when the sounds we encounter are experienced or categorized as noise? How do we navigate our sonic interactions in the public space? How much as a society are we willing to share a space that belongs to all and to nobody at the same time? In a future of sonic borders, how much of our diversity we are muting from each other. How do we listen to a muted place? If we continue to silence things and cancel sounds out, should we start listening to silence?

The aspiration for silence in the public space could mean the loss of certain voices to the gain of our own desires. The sounds we hear in our everyday life can be unexpected and can make us aware of something we were not paying attention to take that unexpected into consideration. How would we listen to all that is sounding in a future that emphasizes (what’s-to-be-considered) silence to the detriment of (what’s-to-be-considered) noise.

Will we be listening to highly designed soundscapes that reinforce specific ideologies in the interest of corporations, institutions...?

It is not my desire to identify the meaning of each sound in the urban landscape for what they can mean to each individual—"one person's noise is another's music"⁴—but to use sound to think about our everyday relationships as subjects to a city, and to use these daily interactions in the city to think about sound.

I utilize sound and listening as a methodology for critical engagement in public space.

Salomé Voegelin theorizes about the possible impossible sounds to "make the invisibility materiality of sound and our own sonic subjectivities something accessible, audible, and thinkable through words." This translates into an approach to listening that engages us to explore sound, silence and ourselves sounding in-between others. Listening to our environment and to ourselves in relationship to others offers a sonic sensibility on how we produce space, a place for connectedness or for isolation, a more public or more private space.

And an effort to listen to silence—or what is not heard—ignored.

In 1952, John Cage's famous 4'33" composition flipped the concept of silence from quietness to sound, and asked a crucial question in the development of sound art and experimental music: *Is there such a thing as silence?* This plot twist in the history of art and music signified a shift to environment sound awareness. If John Cage flipped the concept of silence from quietness to loudness, Pauline Oliveros flipped the concept of listening from low consciousness to high consciousness.

My work is informed by Pauline Oliveros, who became aware not of what she was listening to, but of what she was not listening to. The sounds that her ears were not tuning into were not "unsound," but unselected or disregarded sounds. A constant reminder of that—whenever she was not listening—led her to a constant awareness of listening. For listening brings consciousness to "acting with awareness, presence and memory,"⁵ and hearing is the involuntary ability to perceive sound.

Oliveros' methodology of *Deep Listening* thinks of sound as relationship. Applied to a city's sonic landscape, Oliveros' methodology has the potential to identify how we

establish connections and the boundaries we create in place and between individuals. The organization of life through listening to their sounds.

Aside from silence as a concept in semantics, where it can be observed as a lack of something, in the sonic environment “silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening.”⁶ It can be perceived as intermittent moments between sound variations, between the move from one sound to the next one. There is a perception of a silent moment when we tune out and in from a loud sound to a quiet one, or from a louder soundscape to a quieter one. Yet, silence remains infeasible.

Yet, again, there is a desire for silence.

The impossibility of silence in life does not restrain the desire for silence. Silence is a constant desire that we are not able to physically grasp. It can only be called silence if it is named. Jorge Luis Borges acknowledges the paradox of silence when he argues that “the fact that there is a word for silence means it is an aesthetic creation.”⁷ This silence as a semantical signifier does not signify any physical silence, but the concept of a desire. The signification of silence is cancelled by the physical sound it contains. The signified—which is the desire of silence—refuses silence by sounding and leaves only its desire to be signified. This paradox means that silence only exists under our social and subjective framing, one that is configured according to individual perception and social constructs; one that is influenced by our systems of being and knowing. Therefore, in the physical world, silence contains sound, and it needs to be listened to in order to unmute the individual and social desires. For that, listening to silence brings sound from a place of non-existence to existence, from the muted to the unmuted, and is perceived as the many sounds it consists of.

What constitutes silence?

The desire for a silent soundscape does not understand silence as the beginning of listening, but as its end. For this reason, I attempt to listen to what constitutes silence through an understanding of the *inframince*⁸—liminal crossings of sound.

*Can we listen to our in-betweenness or what is connecting us together in space?
Are we depriving ourselves of listening to what is in the in-between?*

I propose an exploration of silence, in order to listen to the possibilities of sound or the unheard, and of what remains within it. I stress that hearing the in-betweenness is listening to that apparent silence. It is a sonic awareness of what might be sounding but is not heard, because of attention deprivation.

Silence is an ideology.

San Francisco's soundscape craves silence. A silence that technology can plausibly provide; a silence that feeds a self-differentiation or individualistically driven society. My daily observations of this city speak about a city that is ignoring sounds, and for that reason, is silently moving towards a hygienic soundscape that has no need for social sonic interaction within the public sphere. Today, the sonic agency we have in our daily interactions with sound is based on our choices to listen and the use we make of the provided technology. Mediated non-interaction with the sounds around us provides individual sonic landscapes for us to focus on ourselves, rather than listening to others. Focusing on the sounds we want to hear could be seen as a way to be more productive, yet it is the feeling of being productive that is accomplished; a productivity that only listens to our own needs, where instead of *listeners* we become *silencers*.

Shhhhhhh

Performing the Score

I seek to listen to silence in one of San Francisco's most noisy places, 24th and Mission, and from there complicate what noise is, what silence is, and what remains in-between.

It is a journey to consider the possibilities of what silence could sound like. The score is executed in two methods. First, I perform a sound journal of a listening walk that departs from loudness and ends in quietness. Second, I perform iterations of the previous listening walk. However, these iterations do not employ words to notate the soundscape, but a symbol-based language in which I assign symbols to specific sounds. The first iteration only has two symbols that represent "noise" and "silence." The following iterations branch out from two previous categories, into an expanded category of sound which includes—music, voices, vehicle engines, and unexpected

sound. This is an exemplification on how we tend to morally impose the category of “silence” and of “noise” to different sounds based on ideological impositions of what should be noise and what should be silence. The absurdity of sound classification is demonstrated through the iterations of the original listening score, to show that what we call noise and silence are different kinds of sounds. The dichotomy of silence and noise in the first iteration happens to be just different sounds in the iterations that followed.

This method for listening requires the listener to:

- (1) listen to the sounds of a noisy place,
- (2) journal the sounds, and from there,
- (3) walk towards silence.

Score: Listening to the inframince

Sit down in a noisy place for five minutes

Pauline Oliveros’ Sonic Meditation —XXI— *What constitutes your music universe?*

What is the inframince of sound?

What sounds would you erase if you could?

Walk towards silence

What is the inframince of silence?

Can you find silence?

Performing the Score

Listening to the Inframince

February 24th, 2020

24th and Mission

5:20 to 6:20 PM

1

16 breathes in and out per minute

76 beats per minute

2

McDonald's
door's opening,
closing; bus' beep
beep beep beep beep
opening the door; a distant
siren; two women talking; cars
crossing the street; a Ducati's roar;
a man on the phone 'Acá en la puerta
del McDonald's, llevo una sudadera gris
con negro'; keys; McDonald's door opens and
closes every ten seconds; a JUMP Uber scooter passing
by; a bus in contact with electricity; bicycle wheels spinning;
cumbia songs from a store across the street; a plastic cup moving
on the floor; honking, honking, honking; a plastic bag following the
rhythm of a person's walk; a shopping cart; techno music coming out of
a car; disco music; rapid footsteps of a runner; 'I wanna know, have you ever
seen the rain? I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain, Comin' down on a sunny
day?'; a roller suitcase; steps that do not leave air between the ground and the feet [...]

3

The attention to sound comes————and goes
from one sound to another.

My impossibility to grasp one sound
————and keep it.

My impossibility to stop————tuning in and————out
sounds

for more than one————second.

Liminal————crossings

of sounds

tuning in————and out.

4

I can only know the sounds I want to erase once they are gone. Car's hum.

5

I take the 24th Street towards Potrero Hill. Walking slowly, some sounds start to disappear. I cross several streets and alleys, but they are too close the 24th and Mission. No silence yet. Crossing South Van Ness. Crossing Folsom Street. Crossing Shotwell. I take Treat Street to the right.

At 1147 Treat Street three men are drinking beer and chatting in their house garage, they talk about their jobs, money and plan to get out of the city while drinking beer and listening to rancheras; in front of them there is a man living in a van, he is looking for something in his tool box to fix a monitor, the sound of the metal cuts through the ranchers like a sound of another world; now the ranchera invades the tools and the houses around; I keep looking for silence; two men whisper in front at their house door while the music sounds in their background; cars humming; my steps on the ground; the whistle of a referee in the nearby football fields; a kid talking to her grandma passes by; distant car sounds; the graphite of my pencil scraping the paper; a walker footsteps; a plane flying; someone whistling; the ice cream man and his cart; once he reaches the corner, he makes his cart's bell sound.

6

What I called _____noise
_____before.

7

I am at Treat Street and the 25th, walk down towards Potrero Hill. I take the first alley I find to find silence: Balmy.

I still listen to
cars in the distance;
kids screaming and playing;
a plastic cup moving up and down
the alley thanks to the wind; bushes leaves

moving; a place flying; the graphite of my pencil
intensifies as I walk into the alley; a man inside a house coughing;
a distant ambulance siren; a beer can following the previous cup moves.
—————my pencil touching the paper—————

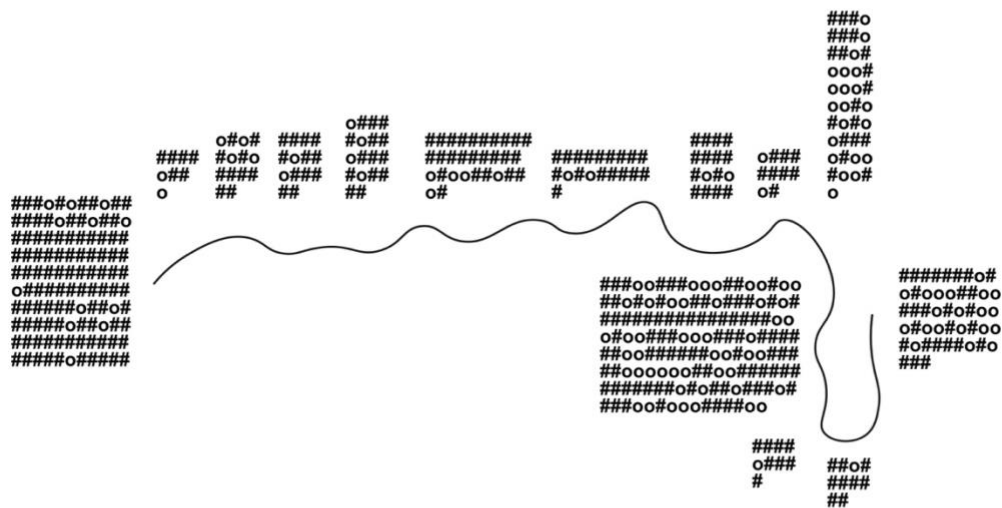


Figure 1: Blanca Bercial, *Listening to Silence*, Iteration No. 1, 2020.

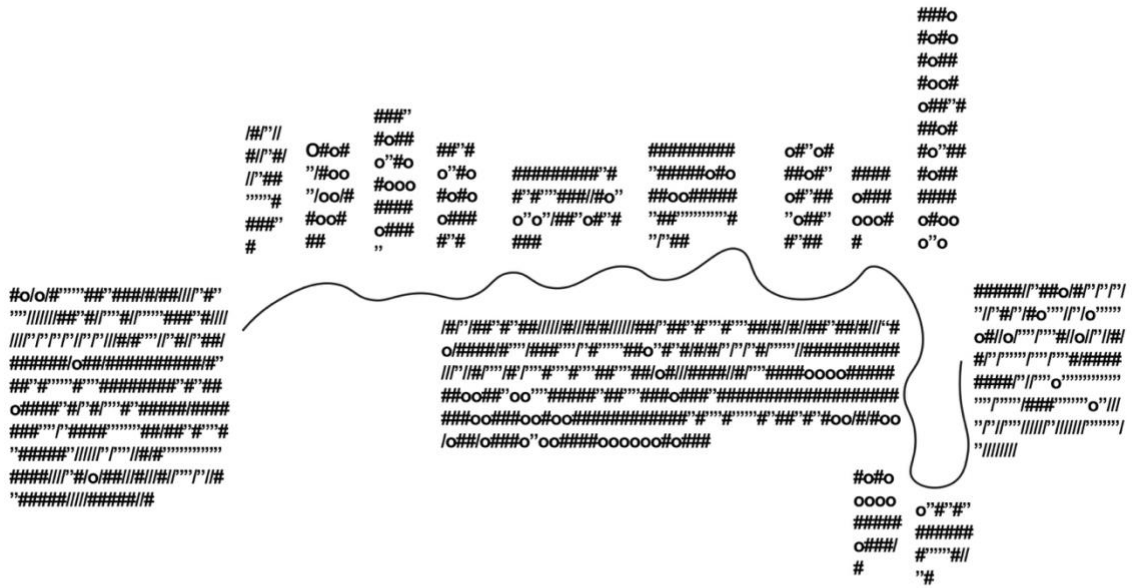


Figure 2: Blanca Bercial, *Listening to Silence*, Iteration No. 2, 2020.

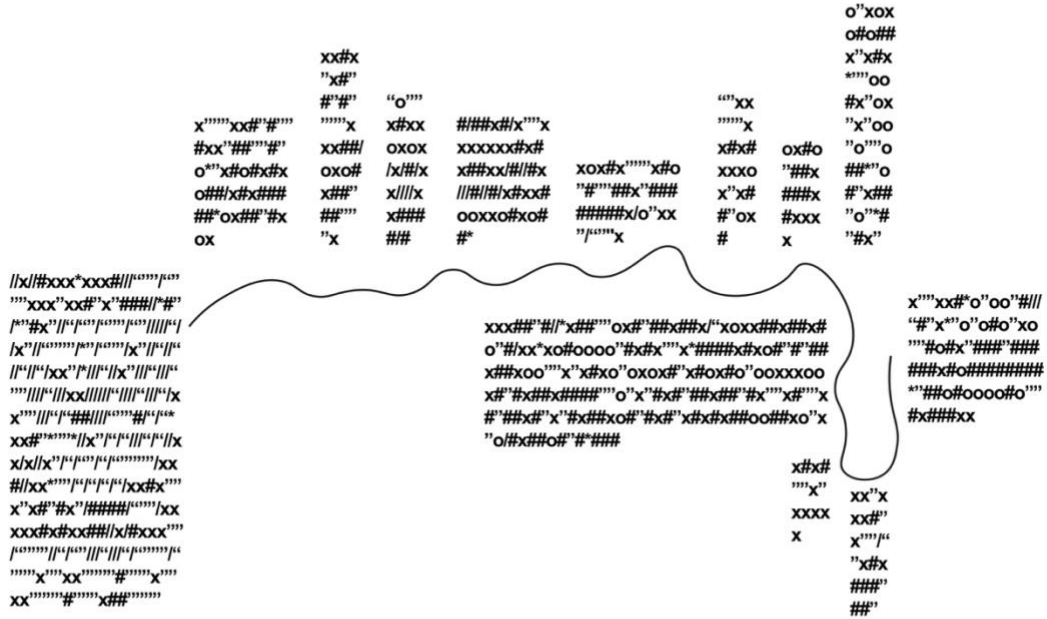


Figure 3: Blanca Bercial, *Listening to Silence*, Iteration No. 3, 2020.

¹ Darren Copeland, "Associative Listening," *Soundscape, The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* Volume 1, Number 1 (Spring 2000), 24.

² Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester University Press, 1985), 6.

³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester University Press, 1985), 3.

⁴ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (MIT Press, 2012), 192.

⁵ Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (iUniverse, 2005), xxi.

⁶ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (A&C Black, 2010), 83.

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, ¿Qué es la poesía? July, 13, 1977, Teatro Coliseo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, YouTube, video, minute 10:16 of 51:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4t8gafps3A>.

⁸ My interpretation of the inframince derives from Marcel Duchamp. I define the inframince not only as an experience existing in the physical world, but also, as a concept. Conceptually, listening to the inframince is a journey to listen to our sonic interconnectedness in the public space, perhaps listening to what we normally unhear, or define as silence.