

NICK HERMAN AND JAN TUMLIR IN CONVERSATION

NH: How did you begin your work on this book and where did your interest in the intersection of music and painting originate?

JT: I have been thinking for some time about the connection between monochrome painting—in particular the colorless, black or white variety—and a certain type of sound production that veers away from music into noise. The connection between abstract painting and music has a long history, and typically it hinges on the relation between color-tones and tone-colors, as I mention in the introduction of my book. This interplay is central in the development of modernism, yet between the colorless and the atonal something else occurs. On either end, the audio-visual correspondences cannot be charted in the same systematic manner; rather, they begin to point toward a condition more closely aligned with the post-modern. So I began exploring the idea that Malevich represents an early example of this turn. He backdated his *Black Square* to 1913, which is the same year that Luigi Russolo published his manifesto “Art of Noises,” and the fact that Malevich’s monochrome made its initial appearance in his set design for the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, amidst an atonal score and a nonsense verse libretto—all of this led me to think that there is viable material connection between these realms of sonic and pictorial production.

NH: I immediately key into Malevich’s interest in religion as an important context for Suprematism and the idealism of abstraction. Here the artist is no longer trying to depict a symbolic truth so much as convey feeling or sensation. The painting is presented as a medium of transmission. I’m curious how this relates to your emphasis on the physical material of the painting itself, and again to the question of noise.

JT: Yes. I want to argue that Malevich is a materialist. Obviously, the Bolshevik revolution is drawing close when he actually unveils his monochrome in 1915. Yet this period is also gripped with a kind of messianic fervor; it’s full of religion by other means. So, on the one hand, there is a desire to deal with the strict material properties of what a painting is, which could be seen as politically progressive, but then, as you point out, Malevich never lets go of the spiritual aspect. I think he holds these two things in a weird balance... Actually it’s more like he holds them in tension, and this is often resolved in a comedic way. I think he was very fond of paradoxes, and one way that you resolve a paradox is through a joke. I sometimes speak about the *Black Square*, the “supreme painting,” as also being a caricature of a painting.

So, the *Black Square* is fundamentally a materialist negation of the icon. That's why it was originally hung in what was the sacrosanct corner of the room reserved for the icon—to demonstrate just what had been negated. This work bears no image, but then it is also potentially the ground of all images. It constitutes both an impasse and a portal. And this brings me to your thinking about static in your essay “Exstática,” because static is likewise what shrouds and conceals our communications while simultaneously revealing what those communications are essentially made of. The same is true of the *Black Square*: once the image has been erased from the painting, what we have is all the leftover material, factual, empirical stuff that the painting is made of—that is, what was there all along. But now it rises to the surface. It presents itself as something else, potentially as nothing, but really it is the basis of everything you saw before.

NH: That's what is so compelling to me about noise and why it is so closely associated with radicalism and transcendence. Because it suggests a kind of stripping away or breaking apart, but it is complicated because, by virtue of this violent shattering, it can be very inclusive and profligate. And this is what I am trying to get at in “Exstática,” that static can function as a kind of connective tissue, almost in a promiscuous way. This seems important to emphasize. When there are so many existential questions regarding cultural and ecological boundaries, there are still these ubiquitous mediums that infuse everything, invading our bodies and the material world.

JT: When discussing both visual and aural static, it helps to remember that they are always there in the background—and this is true of noises of all kinds. Once recognizable signals are cancelled out, that is what you are left with. It has touched everything, and is in this sense “profligate,” as you say. And sometimes just feeling that “boundary” is what allows you to see it or hear it.

NH: On some level what we're describing can be seen as hyper-obscure or even nihilistic, but to me keying into these different registers of noise reveals really generative patterns for seeing and hearing more broadly and deeply. I think this is why people appeal to mysticism, because depending on your recording device noise resembles a kind of exquisite code emanating from all things.

JT: Right, well, discussing mysticism in art can seem retrograde, but then of course there are all sorts of radical mystical sects that have nihilistic, or maybe more accurately, anarchistic ideologies, advocating a kind of leveling out of social hierarchies and power structures. And this is precisely the sort of thinking that got Malevich into a great deal of trouble in his own political context. He was a mystical anarchist. It's interesting to note that these monochromes that today appear so

historically inevitable were sometimes made by people who really were off on a tangent. Works now venerated as unequalled masterpieces in museums were made, in a sense, to be given over to the viewer to do with as they wanted. The *Black Square* was repainted at least seven times, I think, and on some occasions not even by Malevich, but by his students. The message is clear: do it yourself.

NH: That's exactly what I was going to pick up on, this idea that the work is not stable, and your book is proposing that radical ideas are premised on instability. And this is of course perfectly embodied in both the physics and the social history of noise. I mean Malevich's works were objects that were often made for the theater and as props. They were tools.

JT: Yes, I think that this aspect of those works becomes more clear and more poignant when you relate them to noise, which is something that is inherently more difficult to own and proclaims its instability more openly. And, to an extent, noise remains disturbing across time. Marinetti's "Parole in Libert " poetry readings and Russolo's machine music remain jarring in a way that Futurist paintings do not. That stuff still is difficult to tame. But when they are taken together, the sounds undo the pictures and maybe restore some sense of craziness to them. The score and libretto of *Victory Over the Sun* certainly have that effect on the *Black Square*.

This is a kind of static that we have to summon up from the past, which brings me to your interest in static as a technological phenomenon that is presently in a stage of withering, to take a cue from Benjamin. As you note, with our high-resolution sound and image technologies that give us an on/off relationship to representational objects, static is no longer so commonplace. Your essay reminds us that for the better part of the 20th century our experience was defined by transmission and reception mechanisms beset by static, that there really was no way of avoiding it.

NH: Yes, that is the legacy of static that is so cool: it was, and remains, at least furtively, a universal phenomenon that measures disruption.

JT: So, I'm curious about your etymological investigation of the terms static and ecstasy, and here again we observe a kind of double-edged or two-faced aspect.

NH: That's key. That is a way to think about these technologies functioning like a trickster or like Jekyll and Hyde. The idea that there is an anima, an energy of some kind that exists in all matter, this is embodied by static. I'm not nostalgic or fetishizing the technology per se; rather, I'm interested in what it says about our instincts

for broadcast and reception, and the vital role tuning in to different frequencies plays in art, and more broadly—and here I’m off on a tangent—in the evolution of consciousness. “Exstática” combines two totally separate phenomena, ecstasy and static, and explores if one is not contingent on the other.

And of course the advent of radio and television broadcasting gave rise to all kinds of popular fiction describing alien forces, not to mention paranoia about the State. In this respect, it becomes a prevailing vernacular of the 20th century and ushers in Science Fiction and Futurism in general.

JT: One of the things you refer to at the end of your essay is this question of access. Today, the relation of static and resolution is premised on one’s socio-economic status.

NH: Today there is a widening gulf between technologies that signals an even more dangerous divergence in basic terms of life, including speed and information. Meanwhile there is something to be said about environmental pollution as a kind of deafening noise.

JT: You write about the experience of static being de-centering but also grounding. The Greek root of the term implies “unmovable, predictable and stable,” as well as the notion of standing in place. So, static locates you where you are even as it appears to relocate you somewhere else. No matter how faintly, it always portends a paradigm shift in our standing. I guess this is also what we are considering with Malevich, our radical un-grounding and re-grounding on another plane.

NH: What’s so interesting about static is that it seems dissonant and unpredictable, but in fact, from a scientific perspective, it is the stable basis on which to measure other kinds of aberration or noise. What’s profound and spooky about static is that it’s the one thing that scientists were not able to filter out, and then they realized... this is the constant “sound” of the universe.

JT: It’s a constant of the universe, but it’s also the sound of the medium itself, the mechanisms of recording and playback, or transmission and reception, “speaking in their own voice,” as it were. And in that sense I think there’s a link to the monochrome painting, which is without any image, without any composition, and really without any abstraction even, because nothing is being abstracted there, so it’s rather a kind of concrete proposition of just the machine that is a painting. This machine is made of canvas with some pigment on top; it’s archaic, but not unrelated to newer technologies like television, for instance. When broadcast images

are corrupted by static, you see something pure: the raster. And then, as you note, the sound of static and the images of static are also a portal for all kinds of fantasies about what we are, and what is outside of and between us, and what's invading us.

Another way to frame static is as a prophetic device, because every medium in the mystical sense always has to look through some kind of distorting screen to make out the future. They have to peer through smoke or water, or a crystal ball. The view has to be distorted in some way to imagine the future.

NH: Or be struck blind in order to hear.

JT: I like to think about the relationship between noise/static and the monochrome somehow partaking in that, the modernist-materialist insistence on medium-specificity disclosing a mediumistic side that is archaic and, again, mystical.

NH: In this respect art can function like an instrument, a measurement device to measure other phenomena. Smoke and water obviously measure multiple wavelengths, they reflect and move like a kind of mirror.

JT: This is where the two-sided aspect of the monochrome becomes clear, because when you bring it together with noise it becomes just this kind of instrument. It's not only about the blunt laying bare of what something is, what a painting is or what sound is. Something else has to be revealed in the process; this is what makes it art. There has to be an aesthetic precision, a sharpness, in how these instruments are employed.

Jacques Attali writes that noise is "the herald of the future." Noises are always there and generally ignored, but noise, singular, is what rises out of the background and disturbs you, forcing you to wrap your mind around it. It creates a problem that doesn't go away until you change your way of thinking about it. This is an experience that has to be very accurately set up and delivered—that is, perhaps paradoxically, it has to be somehow composed.

NH: What I'm left with is that sound retains a promise that is perpetually renewed, and like you were saying about John Cage, sound is always bracketed by endless atmospheric noise, so there's a kind of vitality based on infinite amplitude or tone. It's how we choose to filter.

JT: Cage's 4' 33" is a rhetorical piece, a demonstration of the fact that if you were to listen attentively to what's all around, you would actually be composing, choosing first this and then that sound, and ordering them in time, which is making music. The "music of all sounds," as he put it, advances the agency of the listener; it asks us to make something of it.

So, there is an arbitrary aspect to this—it could be anything—and yet the experience has to be very carefully delimited, framed. One works on the borders of noise to lend it a thrust that ideally moves the game forward.

NH: It does continuously renew the agency of each individual in their listening, in their conscious reception, and in their place in history. There is a kind of human dynamism inherent in it: you are hearing external sounds, but then you are continuously contributing to those sounds by virtue of your own bio-functions and actions. So, there's a permeability that, in this case, is not an apocalyptic vulnerability but a kind of deeply organic heterogeneous intercourse that we have all the time with the environment. And that's sort of my idea when I say you "are an antenna."

I think this is why we return to materials, because materials are to art what etymology is to language. They speak to the background, and to the evolution of our technologies of visual and aural communication. And this is why the material aspect of the monochrome is so important. It is making the point that "the medium is the message."

JT: Yes, but remember that McLuhan also says that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium."

NH: Like looking through smoke.

JT: Or looking at an empty painting while listening to noise.

"Incidentally, although the contemporary word for noise in French is bruit, Old French used the word noise, the same as in English.

In Old French, noise means a noise, outcry, disturbance, a quarrel, derived from the shared etymology of the English and French word, traced back to origins in the noise / noise of sickness and nautical roots.

Nausea and nausée are derivatives of the Latin nauseam, and the root is originally derived from the Greek naus.

Naus, ship, noise, and the French words, noise, nausée, nautique, navire, belong to the same etymon.

In short, they are related to the sea.

So noise is a sea of sound,
pure frequency, uncontaminated by symbolization—
or sound waves.

Noise is always derivative.

As there is no origin in a wave;

I am not a source of movement."

-Parasite Noise

Yasunao Tone