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## **R. Bruce Elder**

### **On Sound, Sound Recording, Making Music of Recorded Sound, The Duality of Consciousness and its Alienation from Language, Paradoxes Arising from These and Related Matters.**

First, a distinction is required. You have produced quite a number of recordings and works other than film that make use of replayed sound. Those recordings can be sorted into two or three types. First, there is the music that you have produced, first with various jazz groups, and later, with the CCMC, a group which produces music by collective improvisation. The concerns of the ensemble resemble your own in important. One similarity is that the recordings incorporate quite spectrum of forms, from forms resemble the atonal, "free jazz" of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or Albert Mangelsdorf, through forms which, while more tonal, still avoid the theme and variations structure of traditional jazz, through passages that allude to recognizable themes (which sometime appear as quotations) to the actual incorporation of familiar material from tapes, AM radios, etc. This range is not unlike the range from abstract to representation which your visual artworks sometimes feature; your recent show of paintings at the Isaac Gallery, for example, all cast this span into a structuring opposition which the paintings attempted to balance. Furthermore, the work often incorporates a diversity of material, from the sounds of a grand piano or double-bass down to sounds produced with a party novelties, plastic tubing, noise, hiss and snatches of pop music from cheap radio receivers, etc. Your films and constructions also sometimes use a range of material, and the effect of these distinctions A third similarity is perhaps the most important. A reason that your works excite so many of us is that they are adventurous works that both convey and invoke the thrill of discovery. In your visual art, you have made extensive use of systematic (or quasi-systematic) structures that determine the range of some the variables which the work varies. Having planned the system, you allow it to vary the "parametrized" features of the artwork. This permits unforeseen

occurrences. There is three point relationship between system, medium and artist, and though the system relates to the medium and the artist both problematizes the medium and invents the system, all three points exert a pressure on the final form. This creative method acknowledges that the artist is not the only force that gives shape to the work, nor is the artist claimed to omniscient creator who conscious skill and unconscious canniness afford him or her complete and perfect knowledge about character of the work he or she is creating. Rather, things are permitted to happen which the artist could not have foreseen. Your improvised music also relies on strategies that open you up to unforeseen occurrences, perhaps in an even more radical fashion. The music is open form, obviously, and the relation from part to part such that a there is spectrum of possibilities for what event might follow its predecessor. (Hence, the classical canon of unity which was based on the conception that the unity of work is inviolable, and that the relationship of one part of a work to another could not be other than it is without reducing the quality of the work is repudiated; and it seems to me that this repudiation goes hand-in-hand with surrendering the conception of the omniscient artist that is the sole point of origin of the work of art.) Because you work with an ensemble, the spectrum of possibilities is expanded, because sensibilities and ways of thinking other than your own come into play, and these might be open to possibilities that you yourself are not.

But some of your sound compositions are of another sort. These are even more strongly

related to your visual art work. These works fit into two categories, site installations that include replayed sounds, and sound recordings that are autonomous objects. In the former category are A Casing Shelved, Tap, and Hearing Aid, and, extending the point somewhat, we could say your films, and especially Rameau's Nephew (by Diderot) Thanx to Dennis Young, by Wilma Schoen and See You Later (Au revoir); in the later, Michael Snow: Music for Piano Whistling, a tape recorder and Microphone, The Last L.P., Two Radio Solos ----quebec thing-- etc. While your recording with the CCMC do not foreground (to borrow that useful term from Mukarovsky) the recording medium, these works do. In fact, The Last L.P. takes techniques, such as multi-tracking and mixing, that were developed as techniques for recording, in fact, primarily for producing accurate sonic "images" of large ensembles, and puts them to creative ends, to create something new rather to make likeness of some already existing thing.

Do these distinctions make any sense to you, or do you, see your work in sound as all of piece, and perhaps all of a piece with your visual art work.

## RESPONSE

Since the time of Cézanne, and with even more insistence, since that of the Cubists, artists have announced repeatedly, and made artworks that bear out the conviction, that art's proper business concerns the mechanics of perception. One statement of that belief, my own favourite, appears in Joseph Conrad's preface for The Nigger of the Narcissus as "a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe." My fondness for Conrad's comment can be explained by the fact that it expresses a deep reverence for the phenomenological world--a lesson that artists again and again have tried to teach, from the first days when art was right down to the present, as the kind words that Stan Brakhage recently offered in hommage to my work indicate. Cherishing the gift of the given results in revelations, as the reward of that issues from attending to the manner in which the given comes into presence are epiphanies. We return the gift of presence their favours in cherishing them and holding them fast.

Of course, recording is cherishing, and serves to hold fast something that is disappearing. This is purpose commonly served by ethnographic recordings. The conceit of the making of one of your own "recordings", The Last L.P. is that it is ethnographic recording of just this sort. But The Last L.P. doesn't just pretend to be recordings of vanishing cultures; it pretends to be the last example of its form. And there is a certain tragic dimension to this, in attempting a preserve the cultures dying cultures, though the examples that are supposed to saved for us are not really of the work of the cultures from which they are said to be drawn, but rather your inventions. There is no such thing as authentic preservation, for every representation is invention instead of accurate recording. And anyway, the media of representation, especially in our time, are no more universal, and hardly any more enduring than what they represent. What purport to be reproductions are not reproductions but creations (as always.) So they never grasp what is the processing of disappearing. And even if they were reproductions, they would still not conquer time, for even the medium in which they are reproduced is in the process of disappearing. Comments about this tragedy?

## RESPONSE

Michael, please excuse a rather lengthy preamble.

Conrad is, along with Louis Zukofsky, one of two great contributors great founders of modernism in English literature who had a language other than English as his native tongue. Their relationship to the language in which they created works of art, accordingly, was profoundly different from that most English authors have to the English language--a relation

which I venture, is not entirely different from your relationship to the artistic media in which you have worked. I am constructing what, I hurry to point out, is really a fantasy about what the qualities the experiences of someone who, like Zukofsky or Conrad, writes in language different from that of his childhood, might be. In this fantasy, such a person would always experience the world as sundered, as himself as being adrift.

For language is a home wherein our being dwells, and we discover ourselves through its agency. In its rhythms, assonances, alliterations, rhymes and cadences, we discover our inwardness, our "soul." We, humans, identify with ourselves both in and with the flow of language. Our identification with language is the source of much of the emotional power that language has over us. It explains why, when of an evening we sit silently reading to ourselves, this power is revealed so much more strongly than it is when read aloud, to a group. When the text describes a misfortune or injustice, we feel ourselves broken in the rhythm and flow of the language.

In my fantasy, Conrad or Zukofsky's experience of language is significantly different. For them, the subject is partly held back from, rather than invested in, language. Only a part of the subject, for them, emerges from within language, while another identifies with the ebb and flux of raw or, nearly raw experience. In fact, I think that there is a continuum of types of experience here, from the extreme of identification with the objects represented within language, to the extreme of withholding the self from language, with most of us somewhere in the middle. At the latter extreme is the extraordinary film work of the protean American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, whom I consider to know better than anyone else just how this process operates and what it feels like. Such experience has an almost hallucinatory quality, for it has not been sorted according to the categories of real and unreal, inner and outer, self and non-self. Its spatial features are not fixed. It undergoes perpetual change. There is no object constancy. It is perception of the type before perceptual gestalts are formulated; and so there is no separation of figure from ground, or of object from environment. As the psychoanalyst Marion Milner points out in her too little read book On Not Being Able to Paint, on this way of seeing, the boundary of a vase set against a wall does not separate the vase from wall; rather, it is the curve where the wall and the vase fuse together. This scanning, all-over character of this mode of perception operates along with yet-unachieved object constancy to produce the impression of objects coming into and going out of being, and of their shape being continually altered, as they reveal themselves, then are eclipsed by other objects, or interact with them, even when they fall into the shadow of object objects, which not only produce new shapes on the shapes of the object, but which also serve to occultate parts of its form. In short, such perceptions have all characteristics that the cognitive scientist David Marr attributed to primal sketches, and more besides.

This is what experience before the word is like. It is, I think, precisely because Brakhage accords such importance to this mode of perception that he is so famously hostile to the use of that perspectival system that the Renaissance mathematics of projective geometry and science of geometric optics left to us as its legacy. The type of experience that I have been attempting to describe (and really, there are no words for it, for it a form of perception that exists before the individual acquires language) is experience of a realm where nothing as any form, and constancy--where, really, nothing has any being. Or, at least, only a very small margin separates this form of perception from the confrontation with nothing. When talking about such experiences, one feels disposed to say that it is the experience of being "sous rature"--being under erasure, of being disappearing, being overcome by its opposite. Hence, this mode of perception is associated with the feeling of the negative, and with all nihilating forces, and so with time and death. So Brakhage, who is so insightful about this mode of perception, has created a body of work, most of which are given to us under the sign of death. For the subject of such experience identifies strongly with the every change course of the experience, that this pre-linguistic subject dies and is reborn with every shift in experience. This subject is more than just a labile subject; it is subject strung between life and death.

There are both similarities and differences with your ideas about and attitude towards

recording here, it seems to me. One clear difference is that your films seem to work with, and at the same to contest, the notion that photographic images capture fleeting moments. This, I believe, is something which Brakhage is just not concerned with, as the forms of his work indicate. His films are more concerned with the musical attributes of film. His columns in the Toronto music magazine, Musicworks, a magazine published by institution, the Music Gallery, with which you yourself have been associated, reveals his concerns with poetry are similar, for they are in the purely sounding properties of verse. He seems to believe what half a dozen of the great early modernists famously stated, that all of the arts aspire to the condition of music. His reasons for believing this, like theirs, is rooted in a reluctance to engage with representation that is becoming more and more evident in his own work.

Thus your works have incorporated representation as one of the legitimate potentials of medium, and one of its appeals. Thus, in many of your sound "recordings" you seem as interested in what I shall the photographic or cinematic aspects of the recording, that is with the medium of the reproduction, while ironically, Brakhage is devoted to purely musical properties of cinematography. Yet like Brakhage, your work seems haunted by the idea of death and the nihilating force of time. What seems fundamentally different is your emphasis on the mediating role of medium. Acknowledgement of the mediating role of medium prevents one from completing identifying with the object of the representation. Thus, paradoxically, while Brakhage evinces hostility towards representation, his work is premised on strongly identificatory mechanism. Your work, on the other hand, acknowledges, even if somewhat skeptically at times, the value of representation, yet it also grants importance to the medium, to the constructive, as opposed to reproductive aspects of the medium.

## RESPONSE

I want soon to return to my fantasy about the mode in which Conrad and Zukofsky experience; it may be helpful to explain why. There is I think a prevalent misconception about the purpose of what are known as self-reflexive constructions. According to this misconception, artworks offer metalinguistic statements about artistic media. It was the philosopher Bertrand Russell who produced the first extensive analysis of a distinctions that has become central to our notion of how language operates. In a famous not written to that bigoted, resentful and snarky logician Gottlob Frege, Russell revealed any formal system that allowed classes to members of themselves--tantamount to allowing to allowing self-reference--would inevitable produce paradoxes. To prevent this, he drew a distinction which has become central to the thought of our age, despite being philosophically quite shaky. The distinction is known as the ramified theory of types. It proposes a strong distinction between statements made within a language and statements made about a language. Statements that are made about a language are part of a metalanguage, not part of the language itself.

The distinction was greeted as utterly radical at the time it was proposed, and as probably wrong. But it has been one of the major topics of philosophical analysis for nearly seventy-five years, and has degenerated into something of a commonplace. And so it has entered into academic discussion of film, particularly amongst semioticians and cultural theorists. The conceptually reduced version they trade in serves at least one of the functions that Russell's daring version did--it fends of paradox and so tidies up our mental universe. However, it does this at the cost of suggesting that artworks embody self-reflexive devices so that artists can statements about the medium in which they are realized, and in fact, that the significance of the self-reflexive devices can be exhaustively unfolded into a set of mediumistic assertions. On this interpretation of their importance, self-reflexive works of art can both illustrate and analyze aspects of medium, just as English words can be used or mentioned, or just as Kurt Gödel both numbers both to calculate the value of formulae and to refer to formulae which involve numbers.

This model can surely be applied to a few works of art. Dziga Vertov's masterpiece, Man

with a Movie Camera, for example, is, in part a theory of film written on film that both illustrates and analyzes the medium's abilities and inabilities to convey truths. For the most part however, I believe the interpretation to be quite wrong. Its basic failing is that treats works of art as though they were discursive objects--objects that offer a statements about whatnot. Artworks rarely do this, I think. More commonly, they offer forms that suggest or elicit feelings about being undecided about something--about feeling the tensions that surround some activity, or some idea, or some person. Thus one of great failing of this view about the purposes for using self-reflexive forms of construction is that it tends tidy up "confusions," forcing them into resolved views.

Another difficulty with it is that it makes too clear a distinction between use and mention (or between language and metalanguage.) I think the sharpness with which that distinction is drawn is philosophically unjustified but that really is not an issue that I wish to consider here; rather it is an unfortunate consequence of making the conceiving the distinction so very clear-cut. By proposing that it is always quite clear whether a device belongs to the object language or the metalanguage, it slackens the tensions that surround the devices. It suggests that we always know whether a device is employed for its own sake, or being analyzed. Applied to a work such as The Last L.P., for example, it proposes that we can easily sort out those devices which are used constructively, and those that are used critically. This seems to me utterly wrongheaded--and to be characteristic of a sort of wrongheadedness of the age. Any comments?

## RESPONSE

I should like, at last, to return to my fantasy about the mode in which Conrad or Zukofsky experience, and to consider this issue of self-reflexivity in terms of viewer/listener response--in terms of the qualities of the experience the artworks elicit and the implications of those qualities. The subject which I described above, a subject which is partly within and partly held back from language is in exactly the position described in an oneiric fantasy by another great artist of recent times, a colleague of yours, until his unfortunate death by cancer in 1984, Hollis Frampton. Forgive me, please, for introducing another filmmaker here, but it is just the relations between sonography and cinematography that might legitimate the efforts of a film theorist to speak to you about your sound recordings.

## RESPONSE

In the work I just alluded to, Frampton presents the fantasy of a person who spends his life, from the moment of his birth, through infancy, boyhood, and young adulthood, until his death, watching films of another person's life--films that had been taken from the moment of her birth, through every moment of her infancy, childhood and young adulthood, through marriages and an extravagantly successful career in science, to her death. The piece is one Frampton's extravagantly successful philosophical fictions, on of series in writings in which, rather like one of literary masters, Jorge Luis Borges, Frampton proposes ideas about the most profound issues that the human mind has grappled with--about time, being, illusion, identity, history, truth and, of course, aesthetic experience--in a witty, even playful, tone. A crucial moment in the essay alluded to above, "A Pentagram for Conjuring the Narrative" concerns the period of the boy's adolescence, when, of course, he watches movies of the girl's life across the same span of years. Frampton remarks upon the boys total identification with events he beholds there, so that he feels that

young men fumble through the confusion of her clothing to caress his own unimaginable breasts. (Circles of Confusion p 60.)

Frampton thought deeply about the relations between perception, expression and

biology. His best-known remark on the topic, perhaps because it was his pithiest, concerned the range of purposes served by birdsong. His interest in the work of the (appropriately named) Ray Birdwhistle--interest that, I must confess, I have never really understood, is another manifestation of the interest the topic held for him. Those of use had the pleasure of hearing him deliver (in my case, a pleasure that was electro-magnetically mediated, since I was unable to be present) his paper on erotic fascination he delivered at Ryerson ("Erotic Predicaments for Camera" published in October's special Hollis Frampton issue, no. 32) is the culmination of these interests, for it draws together his interests in the archaeology of photography, scopophilia and obscene pleasures of the mathematical imagination. But his remarks about the period in the boy's life when he feels male lovers caressing his unimaginable breasts evince his interest in it as well. Frampton recognized, acutely, that our relation to erotic images invokes just such a subject as I have been describing, that is a fractured subject, one part of which identifies with the objects represented within language, and another part which is held back from language. After all, erotic images place us in the position of the voyeur, that person who consummately articulates these two modes of experience. For, the voyeur is the person at the keyhole, shut out from the experience he or she observes. At the same, the voyeur is aroused by the experience, since he or she identifies with the participants--in fact, typically, with both the male and female and participants, one of the factors which is involved in the voyeurs behaviour. To make the point about identification, we could say that in imagination, every voyeur is a human androgyne, and since there are no real human androgynes, voyeurs usually consummate their activity in the imagination, and can never give himself or herself sufficiently to the real. Any response to this?

## RESPONSE.

I suppose that the fault in consciousness between the prelinguistic subject and the subject that is engendered by and dwells within language which I have been attempting to describe is really split between the agency that Lacanians would refer to as the imaginary and the agency they would refer to the symbolic. Whatever its excesses, and however monstrous its underestimation of the somatic basis of psychic life, Lacanian theory has done us a great service in mapping certain psychic conflicts to the split between the I that speaks and the I that is represented within language. Lacanians show that the I that circulates within language never coincides with that I that speaks the language. Thus the self is always misrepresented within language. However, I would go on to suggest, the self that withheld from language must a prelinguistic self, and this self, I believe, must always be threatened with nonexistence. (Lacanians have said less about the latter point, but I think it may be implicit in the concept of the corps morcelé.)

Thus the structure of our situation with relation to language is a tragic one. For it consists in choice, either one of which condemns us to being perpetually dissatisfied and unhappy. On the one hand we can withhold ourselves from language, in which case we are threatened perpetually with nonexistence. On the other hand, we can surrender ourselves to language, making a home for the self there. What this affords some shelter from the terrors of nonbeing, it also falsifies the self. We can choose a terrifying, but perhaps more authentic mode of being, or we can choose to falsify our self. Neither choice is satisfactory, yet they are the only options between which we can choose. Therefore our being has a tragic constitution that condemns us to choosing between terror and inauthenticity. No other choice is afforded.

The reasons for my interest in the fractured subject are many; those that are primarily philosophical must remain unspoken of here. Some others of them however are immediately germane to aesthetic discussion. Over the past one hundred years, artists have often made works that rely on the artistic analogue of a metalinguistic statement for the make us aware of the texture and qualities of the materials of which they are made up. This, as I remarked above

are is a feature of your visual art, of your performances with the CCMC, and of your sound recordings. The distinction between the subject that is within language and the subject that is withheld from language, I believe mirrors that relation between object language and metalanguage that is so crucial the art of the last one hundred years. On the one hand the subject is fissured and, in the extreme instances, is possessed by feelings of being alienated and looking in upon the place where one's being reside.

You are aware, I am sure, that numerous of your works of visual art embodies tensions that arise from taking a hard look at a scene which we are distanced from (we gaze at it, but are excluded from it) or, the more common of the two sources, from a rupture between the vantage point from which the scene is depicted and the vantage point from which it viewed--examples of the former are Scope and Atlantic, of the latter, Of a ladder, Crouch, Leap, Land, Side Seat Paintings Slide Sound Film, and To Lavoisier Who Died in a Reign of Terror. We could view this matter psychoanalytically, in terms of l'autre scène, that primal scene that is the site of origin and being, and so truth. There would be validity in doing so, I suggest, but it is not this line of questioning that I wish to pursue. Rather, I want to use again to consider your relation to language and medium. For at stake seems to me the conception that the artist does not create meaning, but rather that resides, in part or whole in some material or some system apart from the artist. This conviction seems crucial to understanding you creative methods which so often seem to involve some sort of chance operations. And it is entirely contrary to convictions of, say, Stan Brakhage for whom the artist brings truth out of his or who her own being. It is closer to that claim of Steve Reich I so cherish, that when you are listening to his music, it is not him (the composer) or yourself (the listener), but it, as he refers it (do I detect a replacement for the tetragrammaton?) to which you are attending.

There are few issues here I invite you comment upon, but particularly the chilling (exhilarating so) alienation that some of your works, visual and audio alike, evince...and among the latter, in particular Two Radio Solos.

## RESPONSE

A number of interpreters of Lacan, most significantly Stuart Schneiderman, have suggested a different interpretation of l'autre scène and of the voice of the analyst, which, because the analyst is heard but not seen (for the analysand must not be face the analyst as he or she attempts to engage in free association) feels as though it comes from the other side. That "other side", Schneiderman suggests, is the other side of life, the side of death. I note that in your liner notes for The Last L.P. you mention the music recorded on a gramophone disk comes from "some Other Room"--set out in capitals. You then cite two instances of you prize of the "re-presenting" of sounds from the past--the first, of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Seven recordings, made in Chicago in 1929, the second, "the exquisite last recordings (1950) of the great classical pianist Dinu Lipatti [made] at Bésançon"--a pianist who, as you note, "died shortly after making them. I suggest your capitalizing the "Other Room", your reference to departed musicians and you explicit comment that Dinu Lipatti died shortly after making the recording you cherish all point toward that "other place" the other side of language is the place of the dead.

The illusory being of a record, either of an object or of a sound, is phantasmal, rather like that of a revenant that returns to a time and place and populates it with ghostly traces from another time and place. These images are then like memory, and the very notion of memory brings in its wake the idea of death.

## RESPONSE

A number of the site installations which make use of replayed sound that you have done involve dispersed forms. Tap is outstanding in this regard. That work consists of five elements, “a sound, an image, a text, an object, and a line,” according to your own description--though I must note that one of the points of interest is that object of made up of five sorts of objects that ordinarily would be considered to have varying degrees of concreteness, that lessens as the object is considered more as an information bearer than as a thing in itself. Thus sound is ordinarily considered not to be an object, a line of wire is, though less an object, perhaps, than a more compact speaker. Certainly, you do use various devices that foreground the objecthood, to borrow Fried’s term, of the objects that constitute the piece.

The objects that make up the object named Tap could themselves be referred by “tap.” The sound that heard is that of finger tapping on a microphone. The picture is picture of person, yourself, tapping on microphone--or more exactly, since it is still photograph, making a single tap. The text, a self-reflexive text that describes how the materials for the piece were assembled, is shown in typewritten form, presumably to acknowledge the manner in which the text was produced (just as the content of the text does), to foreground the medium--the paper and ink, and the actual shape of the marks on the page--and so to the objecthood of the text, but also because a text is tapped out on a typewriter.

There are moreover many secondary references--some deliberate, some perhaps not, I suppose. A person taps (on a lectern, a desk, a podium or a microphone) to draw attention to oneself. We can think first about the phenomenon of drawing someone’s attention to something. Artworks are devices for focusing attention; so the sound serves in a reflection about the character of experience. (“What is there about a tap that draws our attention”. “What is there about this tapping sound that draws our attention?” “What sets this tapping sound, as a component of a work of art, apart from tapping sounds I have heard on occasions when someone wanted my attention?” “How does the fact that my attention is attracted by the tapping sound change my perception of the non-aural components of the work, and how does my interest in the work change as my attention becomes more purely aesthetic?” “How does drawing attention to something make it seem “more of a thing”, more “there?””

And then we can think about drawing attention to oneself. Tap involves an elaborate play of revelation and concealment, and the delight we take in that play, as any child knows, relates to the self. Thus, the picture of the person making the tap, is framed in such a way that it is recognizably you, and so it is revealed that you are behind all that we hear or see, though, of course, you are not really there as an actual objects. (In sense, you are not there, an objects you have made stand in for you.) Thus concerns with objecthood, so evident in this work, are linked to the concepts of presence and absence. Considering merely the historical filiations drawn out by this is completely engaging.

Another secondary reference involves a pun on word “tap.” For “taps” refers not only sounds, they also to physical objects, to spigots from which liquids pour. Another remarkable sound/image construction you produced involved taps (of the aural variety) on the side of sink. Punning seems a characteristic way of thinking for you, and one wonders if there was not somewhere in the back of your mind the recognition that a speaker is a kind of tap for sound, a source from which sound emerges, carried by a pipe-like wire, and allowing itself to be turned on and off.

I hinted above that skeptical strategies are pandemic in work; and this work is not without its skeptical ironies. The work makes use of devices that foreground the objecthood of its individual components and others that suggest that allude to that dense, totally presented unity which was, until the recent past, normative. The “integrating” repetition of the colour of the speaker is an example: the same colour is used to frame the written text, the photograph. In fact, the work insists repeatedly on the importance of the frame--traditionally a device for isolating an image from its surrounding and making it more of a “thing.” Thus the sound, a loop, is inserted in a temporal frame; and this is rhymed with the frame of the speaker, and this with the frames around the text and the photograph. Yet, though the work makes use of such devices, presumably to suggest the objecthood of the individual components, and of the whole

object, nonetheless the object referred to by the title Tap (some of which can individually be referred to by the noun “tap,” though of course they are presented not as individual objects but in a series, rather as the object Tap is made up of other “tap” objects.) is remarkably dispersed. The objects that constitute the piece are dispersed through space. The work, despite the many allusions to framing which it makes, opens outward toward the environment in which it is situated.

## RESPONSE

There is another aspect to this dispersal, for the work spans not only different places but different times. We could well take the cord that connects the source from which the sound is replayed and the source from which sound is transmitted as a figure for the dispersal which is as a formal principle is so central to the construction of the work. But in fact, the cord runs back and forth between two times as much as between two places. There is the place where the sound is played, the speaker, and there is the tape recorder; equally, there is the immediate present in which the tap is heard (and again, a tapping sound draws our attention to the present moment) and the time when the recording of the tap was made. Thus, the sound in this work, like the objects presented in a photograph, are dispersed through time. This is part and parcel of the phenomenon of recording. Recording seems to promise the ability to preserve the things in time, to reach across time--indeed, to obliterate time--and render a the object recorded present once again. But here, too, there is twist for the object that was “recorded”, in image or sound, is not ontologically identical with object; at best (or worst) only an illusion of object is presented, in a manner that, willy-nilly, conforms wholly to that nature of the mediums which renders the illusion.

Thus, The Last L.P. pretends to be a recording, a device that will keep alive the memory of the departed cultures. Of course this is a conceit, and not one that we are really invited to believe. That enterprise is referred to with irony and skepticism. This is probably just as it should be, for the idea of preserving memory is indeed odd. For memory is in thrall to time, it must disappear as the span of time that separates us from a particular event surpasses the span of a human life. We do not remember the events we have seen only in photographs from before the time we were born; we only imagine, on the basis of flimsy record, what life must have been like then. We are too removed from the site where those photographs originated. I suppose we all, sometimes, wish to believe that span of time that separates us from that origin could disappear, that the photograph, because it preserves something of the essence of the object, could annihilate time. But time, as all admit, however reluctantly really is inexorable. In your liner notes for The Last L.P. you comment on the effect of illusion that the recording of aural phenomena invokes, an effect that rivals that solicited by images that conform to the system of Renaissance perspective, to wit, the suspension of that disbelief and the credal acceptance that the various objects “depicted” in the composition (in the case of a musical recording, the instruments recorded, in the case of paintings, the catalogue of items that constitutes the object matter of the painting) were co-present in a real space and, at the extreme, co-present with the act of observation.

## RESPONSE

A certain philosopher whose work I find remarkably close to your own in many respects, Jacques Derrida, has written incisively about our desire to believe that surmount any medium of signification to establish an unmediated relation with the signified. (Philosophers traditionally

have written as though they that thinking possesses this wonderful power. The potent alliance forged between linguistics and psychoanalysis has pretty much eliminated all but the vestigial remnants of the once commonplace conception that consciousness is transparent to itself inasmuch as it affords unmediated contact with its noematic objects.)

Like Derrida, you suggest that we can never reach outside a all representing media and make unmediated contact with the object, that there are no points where language reaches outside itself and anchors its itself, in an ultimate act of reference, in the world itself. No phenomenality ever reduces the sign so that the referent comes to actual presence within it, in the fullness of its objective being. The thinking you works seem to imply accords with his claim that meaning is endlessly deferred, for all signs mean only by making reference to other signs which make reference to other signs; this, I take it, is one of the purposes of the puns and plays on words that is so common a feature of your work.

But Derrida's work has a long and venerable--even if far too infrequently recognized--genealogy. At the head of lineage which leads to his work is negative theology which has its origins in the writings of the Pseudo-Areopagite, though I would conjecture that Derrida would be most familiar with the forms in which it appears in writings of Avicenna and, especially, Maimonides. This aspect of Derrida's thought could be rephrased by saying that language is true only if its truth was Divinely guarantee (cf. Derrida's comments about the Transcendental Signifier). However, language has no such warrant, for language is a self-enclosed system that. . . One would be inclined to put here, "that refers to items presented in experience." but the issue is more complex than that, for the language system actually shapes experiences and gives form to the items presented within experience. (And here of course we are back to the fantasy with which our little conversation began.) Derrida's debt to Nietzsche is again clear, for Nietzsche announced decades ago, in The Will to Power that "Knowledge is possible only on the basis the basis of belief in Being." For Nietzsche, the death of God is the passing away of all truth and the vanishing of all certainty. Even the being of the beings of nature became ungrounded with the passing of Being, and so knowledge as it had been traditionally understood--the conformity of thought to being--also lost its gound. Thinking that is not rooted in Being can know no certainties, for it questioning plunges into the downward spiral of infinite regress; only the concept of Being can account for any non-tautological, non-contingent truth. Derrida notes that we cannot know Being, for our language is based on our experience of beings. Hence he finds thinking caught up in the movement of endless deferral, of endless intralinguistic reference. This aspect of his view of language seems to me be, for the precise reasons that Nietzsche gave, the consequence of the negative theology that I believe is the very point of his work.

But your own work seem to me to mourn a similar lack of relation. This, I suggest, is amongst the ideas implied by your frequent emphasis of perspectival character of perception--that we what we know is always partial and often, seemingly, ungrounded. Your work has a skeptical quality, and I think that a basis for it is the belief that thinking is really a form of interpretation and ineluctably affected by the perspective of the interpreter, that there is knowledge that is founded in direct apprehension of the thing as it is itself, unaffected by the conditions under which it is apprehended.

## RESPONSE

Locke, Berkeley and Hume, amongst other philosophers, have argued that consciousness does not acquaint us immediately with the objects that constitute the furniture of external world. Our immediate acquaintance is with impressions and ideas, the stuff of our mental life. "We are locked within the circle the ideas," is a common means of asserting this claim. Though arguing finally against Hume's radical attacks on our claims to apprehend the spatial, temporal and causal principles that order the world as we know it, Kant did accept the empiricists claims that we have no knowledge of the noumenal world, the world of things-in-

themselves. The figure of Kant looms over the French structuralists, and even Derrida, for all his anti-structuralist tendencies, certainly has not escaped his influence. In fact, while reading Derrida, I often get feeling that I am reading something that modern Kant might have written if he felt his Transcendental Deduction of the Categories was breaking down, and he was being cast back, abjectly, into the realm of Hume. For Derrida attributes to language something of the power that Kant attributes to the forms of sense and the categories of understanding, for in his writing language shapes subjectivity--in fact, subjectivity is simply an effect of language. For subjectivity never has unmediated access to things; its awareness is simply the effect of signs, and the meaning we apprehend through signs to not disclose their meaning in pure act of self-revelation, but only through our discerning their relation with other signs, the relations amongst which constitute the system of signs which gives that sign meaning. This aspect of Derrida's we might paraphrase by saying that consciousness is an affair of meanings, that meanings depend on signs, and that signs never reveal their material reference, but only make reference to other signs within the system of signs to which it belongs. This is not so remote from saying that consciousness does not acquaint us with the noumenal realm, but only with things insofar as they have been conformed to the categories that the mind imposes on them. "Il n'y a pas d'hors texte." We know nothing outside of language. But in this regard too, Derrida's thought has affinities with Nietzsche's. Nietzsche had pointed out, again in The Will to Power, that "We think only in the form of language. . . We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language." This claim this statement stakes is not so different from that we say that consciousness knows nothing that is not given with consciousness or that consciousness knows nothing beyond itself, or nothing beyond what we presume are the effects of objects on the sensory system and the mind.

But many of your own works offer formal analogues to the structures of consciousness; Wavelength is the work most frequently cited in this connection, but it does seem a recurrent concern in your work. Your interest in recording derives from an interest in the faculty of memory, surely. And your efforts to foreground the medium of representation in the artistic works that you have made develop from a desire to reflect on consciousness itself and, most importantly, on the distance that separates the objects in consciousness from the objects that represent. We have spoken of various ways in our desires to merge with the objects we desire to be united with are thwarted, and so to this list I will now add another: consciousness separation from the objects it represents.

## RESPONSE

Another site installation work, Hearing Aid also works with the theme a memory and, Tap--and, for that matter, Wavelength, it gives time a spatial figure. Hearing Aid consists of metronome, which is played into a space (when I saw it, at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Montréal, it was installed along a long corridor at the top of a stair case and the large, adjoining gallery space) and recorded and then played back on a small cassette recorder into another; the output from that tape recorder is recorded, then played back on another recorder, in another space.

Like many of your works, its form derives in part from the aesthetics of minimalist and conceptual art; this explains, I think, the similarity that it bears to Robert Ashley's I am sitting in a room. And, to be sure, those material concerns are important, for the work does foreground the effects of the medium of representation, does deal with the representation as a material reality in itself, and does raise to the level of significance features of the processes of recording and re-playing sound that are intrinsic to those processes and always perceptible but commonly disregarded. But, I dare say, the concerns of the piece are not solely, or even principally, such constructivist concerns--concerns of the sort that we generally associate with minimalist and conceptual art. For we recognize in Hearing Aid concerns that are familiar from your visual

artworks--concerns with memory, movement and space. In fact, we recognize that it is a site installation, that, like a sculptural work, that spatial organization is of its essence--though its spatial organization is less solid and more dispersed than of a sculpture. A mark of this dispersal is that the work opens up to the environment, as the acoustical properties of the environment are incorporated into the work. Another feature of the works spatial organization familiar from your films, is that the work spatializes time, to use Panofsky's idiom--it uses a spatial form as an analogue for the structures of time and memory. Thus as we move through space, we leave one event behind and approach another and we approach the source of one sound and the source of the other sound fades away, just as movement through time, and just as in memory. We are like "the now" that moves through time, and our movement through space suggest the manner that even receding through time. And as we move from one tape recorder towards another, we hear a more echoey, and therefore muffled, version of the same sound we heard before. Its clarity and distinctness diminish, suggesting what happens to events as they recede in time and fade in our memories. And after all, what we hear, transformed through the effects of space, is the sound of a metronome, a device for keeping time.

Furthermore, even the stress on the reality of representation serves to reveal that every representation is a distortion, for there is no system of representation that preserves the thing represented in all its purity and individuality. As Derrida points out, there can be no language made up only of proper names.

## RESPONSE

Tap, I have suggested, uses a sound that draws attention to itself, to the present and to its presence. Ironically, though, the original tapping sound comes from another time--firstly from the time and place where you tapped and recorded the sound that you made, then from the other place and time where the tape plays. But, in sense the tapping sound, is present is the room. Its presence and its absence have an extreme intimate, and convoluted relationship with one another, as they do with any strongly illusionistic work. Yet, as powerful as the illusion of presence in this work is, it only makes the impression of absence stronger.

In this work, as in many of your visual artworks, you seem to raise the hope of using representation to, literally, re-present, the object recorded. At the same time, you bring into evidence the medium that intercedes between the object recorded and the viewer. I suggest that the strong feelings your work elicits depends upon our desire to make connection with the object in its full, luminous presence, to transcending all categories and all intermediaries, to reach the thing itself. Then, time and again, you point out that the object is never known in itself, but only through the agency of a medium.

These strong feelings, I venture to suggest, relate to a very desire we harbour. Most of us long to transcend language to tear away the screen that language puts between consciousness and things, and form unmediated relationships with things. We long for a means by which we could tack down the relation between words and the world, that would fix our understanding of objects. But a word never fully presents the world; language does not acquire significance though reaching outside language and rendering the world in the immediacy of full presence. Rather language acquires meaning only making reference to other items within the language, by the differential play of signs among themselves, not by making reference to some external thing. We secure meaning only at the price of entering into a system which then mediates all our relations with things, which, fixes our understanding--and, to all intents and purposes, makes us conscious, for outside the realm which these system discloses there is only the nothingness of random, chaotic impressions. Language is the condition of meaning, and to purchase meaning, we buy into language. The cost of this acquisition is that, once we have acquired language, language mediates all our relations with things. To think, we need a language, but the acquisition of language precludes thinkings's making direct contact with things.

This feeling that being languages as no outside, that we cannot reach beyond representations to things, is feeling which your expose again and again.

## RESPONSE

To return to the considerations which I introduced early in this conversation, these feeling derive from a revelation that would only occur to someone who felt him or herself at the margins of language and meaning, both inside and outside language--one who seeks for a place that no person in fact can occupy, that is, a position of alterity to language.

Another sound-image installation piece, a film installation in fact, raises related issues in an affectively compelling manner. The piece I refer to is Two Sides to Every Story. The title suggests duality and dialogue, a tension between two things both like and unlike--a tension with which several pieces you have made work. And like a number of your visual art pieces, this piece re-enchants a dead metaphor by literalizing it. This work consists of a screen, suspended diagonally in the middle of the room, and projectors in opposite corners of the room with project onto both sides of the screen. Sound accompanies the images, in the form of directions that you apparently give the performers during the shooting. The films we see were shot from two synchronized cameras, mounted on tripods set up facing each other at opposite ends of the room. You sit on one side of the room next to one of the camera operators, back nearly against a white wall. On the opposite wall, a second camera operator films, back against a dark window through which we see the lights of automobiles moving through the dark, and is filmed as he films, just as you are filmed looking through the director's viewfinder or reading from list of instructions, the script, which you hold in your hand and use to direct a walking women who is seen from two sides (unlike the camera operators and yourself, who is seen only from one.) Many of here movements are along the line the imaginary line between the two cameras and so is recorded by one camera as movement towards it and simultaneously by the other as movement away from it. Throughout the piece, we can hear the sound of rain.

This recto-verso construction has an impressively long history, and you had made use of it, in an extended form, in Cover To Cover. But especially notable in this piece is the way that form of installation makes reference to actual moment when the performers were recorded. For one thing, we hear an instruction in the sound track, usually in the imperative mood and so, seemingly, belonging to the present, and see, if we are positioned appropriately, a performer respond. For another, the spatial organization of the installation is isomorphic with the set-up that was used to make the piece. The projectors are situated in approximately where the cameras were, and the events unfold on the screen in real time, so they were seen by the camera in approximately, but not exactly, the same way that they are shown one the screen.

To emphasize this isomorphism, I conjecture, the shooting situation also included a thin screen hanging from the centre of the room where the filming took place, for at one point you instruct the woman to go to the centre of the room and, when she puts her hands forward we notice that they press against a thin transparent sheet; she is then handed an aerosol can and, moving her arm around in circles, she sprays part of the sheet green. A man then splits the screen and she steps through it, rather as we feel, when watching the recto-verso projection that the performs are walking through the suspended screen. Furthermore, after the green sheet of has been cut, the woman returns to the centre of the room where she gestures as though making a screen with her arms. And then later, she is given a matte board which is blue on one side and yellow, blue's complement, on the other. and the camera operators are given blue and yellow filters. There then develops a dialogue between the cameras and the screen, as we see on one side of the screen a solid colour, for an example, and on the other the woman, viewed from behind, with only an edge of the matte board visible, or one side of the screen tinted, then the other, etc.

This isomorphism of the shooting and projection situation suggest what situation we view recreates the situation that was filmed. Even the rain seem act somewhat as the taps in the

piece entitled Tap work, for they seem to make the ambience of the projection situation the same as that of the filming; this is especially true since the piece, as a film installation, must be shown in a darkened room, without windows. But, the viewing situation is not really isomorphic with the filming situation. There are significant differences. The event seen on the screen happens on two-dimensional surface, while the event the camera saw happened in three dimensional space. This means that if you had been present when the film had been made, you could have walked into the space of the performance, or could have walked around and taken in different aspects of the object. If we situate ourselves in different positions in relation to the film screen, we do not see different aspects of the event but simply see the same flat surface from different angles. Furthermore, the event that takes place on the screens is in Ektachrome or Kodachrome or Fujichrome Gaeventchrome or whatever, while the event that took place in front of the camera was in living colour. The isomorphism thus suggests the identity but insists on the difference between the two circumstances.

Crucial to the experience that Two Sides to Every Story elicits is the fact that when watching it, we cannot see everything that we want to see. We hear you issue and instruction, but it might be carried out on the other side of the screen. We need to be on the both sides of the screen simultaneously to see everything that is going on, but we cannot. This points up the inevitably perspectival character of perception, a notion that you have worked with in other pieces as well. It is this emphasis on the perspectival character of perception, knowledge and understanding that I want to consider. Something is always going on the other side of the screen, in a scene we imagine (for we can often guess, though because of the variations described above cannot know for certain) that what we see would be what we see if looked at the scene we are facing from behind. The half-imagined, half-unreal scene we are describing has many of the characters of l'autre scène that psychoanalysts deal with, that scene that we long to merge with, but cannot. We want to everything, but only a being whose nature was subject to the vicissitudes of spatio-temporal location could have such knowledge. So this piece too awakens feelings of longing for a wholeness than we can never apprehend and, I would argue, we can never be, since we cannot be whole if we do not know the Whole, the All-in-One. This integrity is what we long for, and what we are excluded from.

## RESPONSE

If Tap is premised on a radical use of dispersion, some of your disk have been build on a much stronger conception of unity than most "records" are, for they integrate sound, album cover design and text. Your Chatham Square album, Michael Snow: Music for Piano, Whistling, a tape recorder and Microphone is an example. The longest piece on the disk-set, Falling Starts, is based a piano figure that goes from the lowest note on the piano and works its way up to the highest. The overall architecture of the piece is similarly simple. Falling Starts begins with figure played very fast, and slows it down little by little, until it played very, very slowly. What happens through the process is analogous to the fruits of attention, for we discover all sorts of unexpected features in the original recording. (Though this aspect of your work fascinates me, and so I dealt with it early, in note comparing your interests with Glenn Gould's. So maybe we should let those concerns be for now.) The text printed on the cover is highly self-referential, just as Falling Starts itself is; moreover, its graphic design (and the text really is, though the design, made into a graphic) has an overall shape that is isomorphic with that of Falling Starts, for the text starts out large and gradually becomes very tiny. Moreover the text, while partly informational (about the musical pieces "inside the jacket"), has a conceptual density and ironical richness that makes it an object worthy of attention in its own right--that is to say, a piece of literary art.

The cover design of The Last L.P. is similarly integral to the work; The Last L.P. really is a text/sound/image construction, not a sounding recording covered in decorative sleeve. The

liner notes for that piece propose the deception of the ensemble and, through the ironical use of subtle jokes, inconsistencies, and lexical exaggeration (especially with regard to the “factual data”, the names of the performers and composers, the locations where the recording was done) exposes the deception for what it is. They create and deconstruct an illusion just as the music does. Furthermore, the comment on virtually every piece in the concerns the impact of the modern world on the cultures that these works pretend to be drawn from--on what is in fact the technology that was used to create the sound on the gramophone disk. And of course, it includes a few remarks on the history of vinyl-microgroove recording technology. That album too, included a drawing of a mock-antique character, that the notes tell is a priceless artifact in the possession of Kagyupa sect of Tibetan Buddhist monks that indicates the possibility of astonishing antiquity for the Amitabha ceremony, the music for which appears on the album. But the drawing is clearly not antique. Moreover, the dimensions of object of supposedly great antiquity is given as 12 3/4" sq. in., the exact size of a record jacket (making us recognize that the object described is in fact none other than cover illustration.) And finally, much is made of the fact that the entire illustration was done with stylus, while at another point in the notes it is pointed out that gramophone recordings are made and played back using a stylus. The relation between these assertions posits a connection between the visual “recording” on the jacket and the audio recording on the disk inside. Moreover another sort of recording is included on the front cover, a photo of yourself, though the figure is identified in the liner notes as a Soviet ethnomusicologist--an inclusion which indicates the relation between photography and sonography.

In short, the various components of these albums--the sound constructions themselves, the liner text and pictures used and their layout--have a similar sort of relation to one another as the various components of Tap do. This is fascinating, because it radicalizes and formalizes aspects of the object we purchase when we buy a gramophone recording. For these are frequently text/image/sound constructions and there is generally extensive inter-reference between the text component and the sound, especially in that part of the text which sets out the factual data about where and when the tracks were recorded and the musicians that constituted the various ensembles, etc; while the images, and often some portion of the liner text discuss the process by which the music was made or provide some background information about the ideas of the composers or performers that played a role in shaping the music that we are to here. You have taken these aspects of object that we purchase in record stores, and taken them farther.

## RESPONSE

But again, in a fashion your previous work has made us familiar with, there is a twist here. Take the liner notes; I remarked earlier that the notes on virtually all the pieces include some remark about the impact of the modern world of technology on the music, culture--even health--of peoples not enfolded within technological modernity. The album, as a complete object, plays with the myth of pristine cultures being closer to truth than we, moderns, are and mourns the loss of the cultural diversity to the homogenizing imperatives of technocracy. (The Casio synthesizer is taking over the world.) Yet, it is work that also revels in the creative potential of the new technologies, and which suggest that we cannot ever return to these more edenic sites anyway. Once again, I suggest, you are playing with feelings we all have about a lost origin, a source of wholeness from which, perhaps, we are farther removed than we have ever been. These feelings, too, arise from memory--memories which most people cannot even identify.

## RESPONSE

In a similar vein, the compact disk that the Musée de Québec released as part of the catalogue for the *Paysages verticaux* exhibition of 1989 (now distributed by Art Metropole) also suggests the themes of dispersion and separation from origin. That work consists of a number of voices, 22 to be exact, reading out the names of the 34 mayors of Québec City since the first was elected in 1833. The people are not presented in a series, with each, one after another, reading out all the names on the list. Rather the voices are mixed with one another. Different voices reading the same, or nearly the same parts of the text are sometimes juxtaposed. At others, the different voices juxtaposed read out different names.

Most significantly, the voices are recorded with the speaker speaking at a variety of distances from the microphone. Sometimes the speaker is close to the microphone, at other times not. Thus sometimes the ambience of the room in which the voices were recorded is more present, at others it is not.

The variety of voices reading out names, and dualities of female and male, of Anglophone and Francophone, the differences between the textures, speed, and intonational patterns make for a remarkable variety palette of impressions. One remarkable feature of the recording, of course, is the difference between the various manners in which Anglophones read out the list and the manners in which Francophones read it out. By and large, the Anglophones read it with greater hesitancy. This has two effects. Firstly, as the Anglophones (by and large) stumble over the French names, we become aware, in broad terms, of language itself, but more specifically of distance that separates the written text, which we imagine them as struggling with, and spoken language. This distinction, as a previous work of yours, *So is this* suggests, maps onto the distinction between representations and presence. As importantly, it suggests that for the Francophones the names have meaning, but for the Anglophones, they are only material sounds. To return to the fantasy with which initiated this conversation, they are outside language. And since they are outside language, they cannot, though an imaginary act, identify with meanings of the text.

Secondly, and probably more importantly, the play of differences among the aural spaces of the recording again provides a spatial figure for time; we hear the speakers at various virtual distances, just as we are removed in time from the various mayors.

Thirdly the alternations of Anglophone and Francophone, male and female, near and far, assertive and hesitant elicits a feeling of irreconcilable division--elicits, in other words, feelings of the lost whole.

Finally, we have a text that is composed of nothing but names. As I remarked above, the dream of a language that is composed exclusively of proper nouns is the dream for a language that foregoes abstraction and generalization, and therefore one through whose agency objects could emerge into full presence. But the recitation of the names does not, in this work, evoke such feelings at all; to the contrary, the work evokes feelings of separation, division and loss. The dream of a full nominalism in which name and object would be identical is vain. We must live with division, separation and loss.