



In A Lonely Place, 2006, acrylic and resin on gesso on vinyl record, 17.5 cm Ø.

YOU POSE YOU LOSE: SILENT INCIDENCE IN THE VISUAL FIELD

Michael Morley

“The object of true, achieved and necessary utterance is silence.”
(Anthony Cronin on Samuel Beckett)¹

Prelude

Samuel Beckett observes and reports upon the object of the true utterance as being silence. John Cage in a similar response to the search for truth in all things resorts to a composition where listening within a void of music is presented as silence, or certainly that where there is no recognisable composition. Cage’s seminal piece *4’33”* has become the composition that confounds and confuses and yet ultimately reveals something about this search for a representation of truth. That it represents silence and at the same time represents all sound is the ultimate achievement of *4’33”*. That in a strange way it also engages with the history of recorded sound is a happy accident of Cage’s use of chance within the construction of *4’33”*. The length of time for Cage’s composition is also the approximate maximum length of time for a seven-inch record rotating at forty-five revolutions per minute. Beyond this length the recorded music embedded within the vinyl begins to lose fidelity due to the bunching of the grooves pressed into the disc.

I was initially drawn to Cage’s ideas about silence and how these silences can be physical and/or phenomenological. How these silences are not the inverse of sound, but how silences complement the sound that the silence frames. These would be the physical manifestations of silence with regard to sound. There are other silences that we engage with every day. These may include, but are not limited to: the silence of regret, the silence of hate, the silence of shame, or the silence of love. These are phenomenological examples, and refer to Cage’s desire to liberate silence from the idea that it is a void and null. Silence is the operational pause within the flow of the quotidian; it allows for concealment and reflection within the arc of our existence. It is precisely the kind of silence that Cage was expecting to be revealed within *4’33”*.²

Every place has its own unique silence. The anechoic chamber; a space designed to suppress sound, amplifies the sounds made within the participant body’s resonating cavities: pumping, whooshing, crackling, and snapping with fluids, gases, and electrical current; a simple beach setting at

sunset, crashing waves, cries of birds and children, gravel and sand grinding under the unstoppable ocean, and distance traffic creating a constantly phasing hum of activity. Silence at an imagined zero limit seems impossible at any given location; rather the suppression of sound to varying degrees of success is all that can be attained.

Reference to a location's silence has particular significance within the film industry, in which silence is recorded in order to capture the ambient audio qualities of a particular place – for insertion into the soundtrack, should it be required. This has the ability to lock the audio event to the recorded visual frame, and creates the illusion of connection between the two events: the images that constitute film or video, and the audio. The composer and writer, Michel Chion, states that the event of silence "is the product of a contrast."³ It is the question of how this contrast is interpreted that becomes one of the most compelling arguments for the need to examine relationships between silence and the visual field.

Composer and writer Toru Takemitsu suggests that: "confronting silence by uttering a sound is nothing but verifying one's own existence."⁴ When one considers this notion in terms of painting one is confronted by the very silence of the object. Painting conveys ideas, but at the level of interpretive contemplation, no sound emanates.

Within my own practice as a painter, I have been examining this relationship between sound and image. Paintings of twelve-inch records playing – or at least *appearing* as though they are playing – engage with an attempt to visualise aspects of the correlation between silence and sound. The paintings are always mute, this is a given, yet their titles refer to an object, and that object can be made to play a recorded sound. This recorded sound is not the actual sound of the performance, but a collage of sounds captured at another moment, whether in a studio recording or during a live event. This fictitious performance renders the performed song silent – it is only the recorded song that can be used as aural evidence of the music's existence. The ability of the viewer to grasp or recall an idea of the sound that the title implies assists in re-creating the aural memory, thus enabling recognition by the viewer of the painted subject.

My obsession with sound and image has also led me to investigate architecture as a site in which to examine the ongoing relationship between the visual and auditory fields. Buildings exist within the physical environment and thus operate as silencers or amplifiers of sound. The building silences the sound within it; no noise escapes the suffocating combination of walls, floors, and ceilings. The building also excludes the noises that occur outside of it (perhaps in some cases not as efficiently as they should) but the general intent is to exclude the 'unwanted' sounds of the external world.

My own paintings of unidentified buildings operate as signifiers to this loss of sound. In these paintings I am looking at the architectural, the single building, and the anonymous monumental architecture that is surrounded by sound and which envelopes sound. This is the sound of the urban, of the city noise that is incessant. The intention is to reveal the building separated from its surroundings and the sound of the city. It is an attempt to see if there is a silence around the idea of the building, without trying to refer to the sound of the urban.

In the latest instalment of this idea I have made a painting called *Empire*. The building in this

case is the Sony Entertainment Headquarters in Culver City, Los Angeles. This is a site of some importance within the entertainment culture industry that operates within the United States. It historically represents the area of the studios, those huge covered and uncovered sound stages in which narratives are constructed with film. Silence plays some part here: the required silence of the film set; the silence of the industry; of deals unknown; of the politics of Hollywood – a world that could be said to be hermetic for those within, but almost certainly for those without. A complicity is revealed most acutely within the celebrity system itself, in which images of individuals are created as divorced from their reality. Constructed names are used to hide and to obscure the identity of the individual; to create as believably as possible the potential for a universal character which instantly silences the history of the originating individual – Marilyn Monroe, as a dated example of the uses of silences within this system, specifically being NOT Norma Jean.

Most recently I have been concentrating my efforts on the seven-inch record. In this body of work a record is placed on a revolving turntable and painted twice with a gesso layer. Individual acrylic colours and resin are mixed to create a unique palette, and these colours are applied in radiating bands onto the prepared disc, using the turntable as a painting machine to increase accuracy with regard to line and finish. The action of covering the disc with paint destroys the ability for the record to play the song stamped into its surface. The obverse side is similarly vandalised with a label and more resin. A title denotes a once prized audio possession complete with memories and resonances, and yet silenced from its past, and now trapped in a death loop: playable and not playable.

The silencing of the disc with paint is a mere visual representation of something that could be *silence*. Through this process the disc contains not only the unplayable song that its title denotes but also acquires the wider concept of silence as Cage has already explained. The layers of paint and new grooves are freely improvised within the gesso, acrylic and resin with a brush, creating a self-generating 4'33", if in fact it were *dared* to be played on a turntable.

The composer and writer Michael Nyman has said of 4'33":

...[it] is a demonstration of the non-existence of silence, of the permanent presence of sounds around us, of the fact that they are worthy of attention, and that for Cage 'environmental sounds and noises are more useful aesthetically than the sounds produced by the world's musical culture'. 4'33" is not a negation of music but an affirmation of its omnipresence.⁵

Cage's 4'33" is a silence that is contained within a representational structural form, the artefact of the musical score which allows the performer to reveal to the listener that which is around them in an audible sense. The three parts within the composition represent changes influenced by chance operations. That silence is experienced by the listener is not the point of the composition. The point is rather the revealing of the natural world of sounds – and how these might be used to challenge the definition of music to include all sound as being acceptable to the construction of a composition – that presents the most important aspect of the work. The idea of the composition as a democratic event is also very important within Cage's *oeuvre*. The ability for 4'33" to be performed by anybody, at any time, knowingly or unknowingly, echoes one of the tenants so essential to punk rock in the late 1970s: that anyone can play.

“Silence surrounds the dark world of death. Sometimes the silence hovers over us, enveloping us. There is the intense silence of birth, the quiet silence of one’s return to the earth.”⁶

In this statement, Takemitsu speaks of silence as a sign of death; suggesting that absolute silence is only obtained at death and that it is this silence that we forever strive for but can never attain until our final moment. This silence is very different from the silence of Cage, who hopes to include sound as a component of silence; to assist in the idea of a contrast; to emphasise the paradoxical nature of the world - whereas a negation of sound is at the root of Takemitsu’s idea of ultimate silence: this silence being at once unobtainable and forever chimera-like, especially in the way that its quality manoeuvres through space and time.

The notion that sound operates at not just the level of the auditory but also as a signifier for existence and for memories resonates within all references to sound, including music; classical and modern. My initial investigation involved looking at how ideas are encapsulated within a sound sample; a fragment; the memory of the song or melody; and how this may attach itself to some other memory that is not related to the sound, other than operating as a soundtrack for the moment. One perennial example is the scenario where a character within a narrative is in love and a particular song becomes recurrent as either signifying the bond between characters, or as creating the audio link to the memory of an event. Or that scene in which one of the protagonists states nostalgically “they’re playing our song” as a way of locking the moment within an auditory memory, almost it would seem – and this is certainly the case within cinema – forever. The moment loops endlessly in time.

Samples from the cinema within the work of the video artists Christoph Girardet and Matthias Muller directly refer to this effect of the loop. Endless deaths are acted out *ad infinitum* to present to the viewer the idea that: this moment is forever. Angelika Richter observes: “The unseen and unsaid are what makes Matthias Muller’s films so especially effective.”⁷ Essentially, silences are the defining event within these film fragments, as the artists use only partial sequences from a much longer cinematic whole.

You Say You Don’t Love Me

I have ten thousand seven-inch records. The records were mostly purchased by the kilogram from Real Groovy in Auckland in 1995, sight unseen, for an installation project. This in itself goes against the grain of recorded media purchases; certainly one would never normally request such a thing. There is too much at stake here, the possibility of duplication being only one of many obvious problems with the lack of a selection process. However, this was never a concern for the project, as I intended to use records visually – no attempt would be made to play them. The records were exhibited in stacks, as a mute testament to a technology fading fast from popular memory itself. On one occasion a group of five-year olds on a gallery visit exclaimed that they were “big cd’s, and how would they fit inside a cd player?” The records were returned to me after the installation and they have populated my studio and house ever since, in stacks and piles hidden everywhere.

Trying to secret the discs into the architecture of a building is another attempt at silencing the sounds that have been carefully recorded and then pressed into the precious vinyl. I have

always considered these as potential new works, or at least as material for new works, but had not conceived of a project where this could be realised. It was not until I had started to think about sound and silence that I revisited the seven-inch records and they then became the vehicle/medium for my investigation into the relations between sound and silence; an investigation that has become vitally important to my work as a sound artist and as a visual artist.

The record as artefact has been utilised by many in different ways for as long as the medium has existed. The history of recording media is testament to this, and the ways in which artists have subverted the object to fulfil other roles reveal something about the disc as being more than just the substrate that carries sound. For example, and as my work demonstrates, the disc can also be used as a sign for a sound, for that peculiar way in which the groove represents a line wrapped around a central axis point.

When thinking about my stack of ten thousand, I realised that I should try to represent something about silence and memory. This led me to placing the disc onto a record player, having it spin, and to applying paint onto the surface in concentric circles, representative of the loop. (This is an action that relates to my childhood, as being the son of a potter I was forever being drafted into the studio system to assist in the applying of glazes in circles upon bisque-fired plates using the pottery wheel as the spinning/drawing device.)

By painting onto the record I eliminated the song, silencing the carefully crafted tune and rendering it as all but unlistenable. Despite this I did, however, make decisions about just what disc I would be disfiguring, obscuring the actual title and gifting it one that had more *apparent* 'value'. By associating the record with a title from sound recording's vast history of seven-inch record releases, I make a connection to the past and to a memory of the song. This is similar to my strategy employed for my paintings of twelve-inch records playing on phonographs or turntables, the titles of which directly refer to album or long player releases.

The presentation of the seven-inch as the support associated with the title helps to create a level of anxiety. The titles used are specific and the importance of their selection will be recognised by some viewers although to others it may have no meaning. The work has been designed to generate unease within the knowledgeable viewer, the connoisseur, by engaging specifically with the way a record collector may hold particular recordings in higher regard than others. A hierarchy of desire is created and based upon obscurity and in some instances on a silence. Such anxiety contributes to the danger of desiring the impossible; again a chimera that continuously shifts identity – representational as well as conceptual.

You Pose You Lose

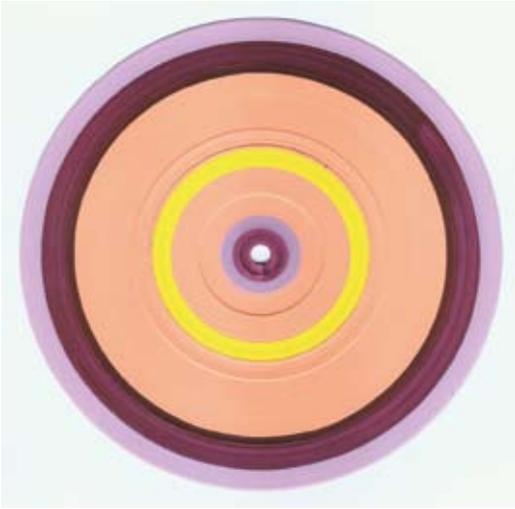
In a recent project by the Australian artist, Marco Fusinato, *O_King variations* (2004), circular drawings by the artist are translated onto polyvinyl carbonate discs by the New Zealand disc-lathe recording engineer, Peter King.⁸ Grooves just as one would expect on a twelve-inch disc masquerade as a 'long player', but hardly as the repository of music or sound. Sometimes the grooves cross over one another so that a lattice of silent grooves traverses the surface of the disc. The very act of supplying

drawings rather than an audio master disc is the first of many transgressive acts committed within this work. The PVC discs utilised do not have the authority of hot-pressed black vinyl. The discs are presented resting upon a small purpose-built shelf, naked and susceptible to accidental damage, dust, and scratches; but also allowing for light to produce faint shadows upon the wall behind: an impossible and successful attempt at drawing the sound of nothing.

Cover art and inner sleeves are made redundant. In a cruel trick Fusinato has also released a four disc set of black vinyl records complete with inner sleeves and glorious heavy metal and extremely gothic cover art that acts as a 'greatest hits' compendium of the *O_King variations*. The stuff of collectors' dreams but ultimately unplayable, the discs represent another attempt at Takemitsu's desire for silence as an affirmation of existence.

So what of silence? Can a painted seven-inch record really be representative of silence? In a purely literal sense one can still play these things if one must. The obverse side is painted in predetermined, individually mixed colours, and sealed within a layer of resin; while the converse side has a label affixed denoting title, with a layer of acrylic varnish applied to further encase the record in a skin or veneer. If played on a turntable the record then begins to exhibit certain other tendencies. It is silent, but not silent. It bumps, and grinds, and scratches. It mimics the action associated with the object, yet nothing is transmitted; the colours are grouped as loops but no linear notation is apparent and the title does not connote the sound.

The sound is not music as such but more specifically noise. It fulfils Cage's desire for the listener to actively listen, and in this case it becomes the sound of the needle bumping onto the surface of the disc. This sound also appears – as Takemitsu asserts – as an answer to the void of death. It comes to represent the idea of sound, but must remain silent, or unplayed, to fulfil the idea of audible silence; and perhaps now an absolute silence, the record being effectively dead, embalmed and mute.



Hurricane, 2006, acrylic and resin on gesso on vinyl record, 17.5 cm Ø.



Dance Machine, 2006, acrylic and resin on gesso on vinyl record, 17.5 cm Ø.

- 1 Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 376.
- 2 John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 1966), 8.
- 3 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 57.
- 4 Toru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence* (Berkeley, Calif.: Fallen Leaf Press, 1995), 17.
- 5 Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), 22.
- 6 See endnote 4.
- 7 Kathrin Becker (ed.), *Album: Matthais Muller* (Berlin: NBK, 2004), 96.
- 8 Peter King operates King Records Worldwide (originally out of Geraldine, New Zealand), a disc-lathe operation that transfers audio recordings from tape or compact disc to a polyvinyl carbonate disc. This is a typically home-made solution to the problem of no record pressing plants in New Zealand and has been used by artists from New Zealand and overseas. Records can be made in limited editions from 20 – 1000. Please refer to the URL for more detailed information about this service <http://home.comcast.net/~cassetto/> as last visited on 6 October 2006.

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