

# SoundEffects



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience

*Andrew Cappetta*

## Listening today

James Ferraro's '*Far Side Virtual*'  
and the fate of functional sounds

Andrew Cappetta  
PhD Candidate  
The Graduate Center, City University of New York  
[andrew@rayr.net](mailto:andrew@rayr.net)

[www.soundeffects.dk](http://www.soundeffects.dk)



SoundEffects | vol. 5 | no. 1 | 2015

issn 1904-500X

---

## Abstract

---

*On his 2011 release, 'Far Side Virtual', artist and musician James Ferraro employs a distinctly new, yet familiar palette of sounds from the logon sound of Skype to alert sounds from computer programmes and melodic ringtones. The record demonstrates that the functional sounds of the digital listening environment often interrupt and become enmeshed in the programmed composition. While some critics lauded 'Far Side Virtual' as a playful conceptual gambit of music-making and listening in the digital age (it was named 'Record of the Year' by The Wire), others criticised the utter banality of its sources. This reaction reveals a deep irony within an experimental music community dedicated to the theories of John Cage. Listening – Cage's liberating approach towards music-making that allowed non-musical, functional sounds to enter the composition – has become an orthodoxy with strictly defined stylistic parameters. On 'Far Side Virtual' Ferraro adopts Cage's method of listening as composing and, in the process, reveals how these methods seek to remove sounds from their contextual origins, an impossibility in the contemporary digital listening environment.*

---

What defines a functional sound? 'Functional' implies that the sound has a specific use, embedded in its formal qualities (e.g. the enervating tones of an alarm clock). Thus, a functional sound communicates a specific message. While aesthetic concerns shape this message and aid its delivery, the modifier 'functional' implies that aesthetic concerns are secondary, even negligible. Another definition arises: A functional sound could be the secondary, concomitant acoustic result of another, primary function, for example the sound that coincides with an engine running or the noise of construction equipment, or the sound that accompanies a bodily function like breathing. Rather than define it by its use or message, a functional sound could be the unintended result of a physical and mechanical process, a sound that is not intended to send a message or even be heard.

While this search for a clear definition of the term 'functional sound' is inconclusive, the two classes of sound noted here have helped shape the aesthetic of twentieth-century avant-garde and experimental music, providing fertile ground for musicians, composers and listeners who sought to expand its field of possibilities. George Antheil punctuated his percussive score for Fernand Léger's film *Ballet Mécanique* (1923-24) with blaring sirens, while futurist Luigi Russolo developed his own band of instruments, the *intonorumori*, acoustic noise-makers which mimicked elements of the modern industrial soundscape. Even the functional sounds of the human body – the high pitch of the nervous system and the low rumble of the circulatory system – brought composer John Cage to the realisation that there is no such thing as silence. In an oft-repeated anecdote about his experience in an anechoic chamber at Harvard University, Cage notes:

[O]ne enters an anechoic chamber, as silent as technologically possible in 1951, to discover that one hears two sounds of one's own unintentional making (nerve's systematic operation, blood's circulation), the situation one is clearly in is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended. If, at this point, one says, "Yes I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention," the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear. (Cage, 1961b, pp. 13-14)

For Cage, this experience with the functional sounds of the human body helped him arrive at a new method of composition in which the distinctions between music ('intentional') and noise ('non-intentional') as well as between artistic intent and chance dissolve. However, in opening the composition to all sounds – through the activity of listening – Cage also removed sounds from their original contexts, placing them within the autonomous realm of the musical composition. Whether intentionally designed to function (an alarm) or unintentionally resulting from a function (the sound of a circulatory system), these sounds become uprooted from their functional origins when listened to as music. Thus, Cage's method of listening is not passive, as the composer theorised, but rather imposes its own specific conditions and agendas upon sounds (Kahn, 1999, p. 197).<sup>1</sup> A detour into Cage's rhetoric on musical experimentation will demonstrate his modernist underpinnings and disclose a crucial complexity in Cage's method of listening: Even though he opens the frame of the composition to include all sounds, even functional ones, this seemingly generous gesture is matched by a desire to cleanse these sounds of their utilitarian associations, towards abstraction and autonomy.

Today, the field of 'experimental music' has expanded upon Cage's method of listening towards the total embrace of improvisation in which musicians are completely freed from the dictates of the composition or score (Metzger, 1997, pp. 54-55). However, as unplanned as the performance might be, autonomy is still maintained. In the genre of electro-acoustic improvisation, for example, the conventions of the live performance replace the strict borders of the composition, with the participating improvisers strictly policing the kinds of sounds allowed within. Despite the maintenance of the Cagean method of listening as composing, much has changed with regard to *how* both audiences and performers listen today. The dominance of sampling techniques in both pop and avant-garde spheres as well as the widespread popularity of electronic music and DJ culture have made the recording an integral part of the live music experience. (As David Grubbs and Douglas Kahn both argue, Cage was already aware of the recording's infringement upon musical performance [Kahn, 1999, pp. 183-189; Grubbs, 2014]<sup>2</sup>). The ubiquity of digital production and distribution has made the digital environment (the computer, the tablet, the smartphone, the listening device) the singular platform for the creation and consumption of music. Given this changed context, in which there appears to be no 'outside' to the

designed digital environment, can the autonomy sought by Cage's mode of listening be maintained? If all sounds in a digital environment are designed, what qualifies as a functional ('non-intentional') sound? In this same environment, is there a distinction between music and functional ('non-intentional') sounds, i.e. noise? James Ferraro's 2011 record *'Far Side Virtual'* offers answers to these questions. In the record's production Ferraro retrofits Cage's method of listening as composing for the twenty-first-century musical context, employing a palette of digital functional sounds which range from the 'non-intentional' to the musical. Since the avant-garde legacy is, in part, based on the act of reframing functional sounds as musical, *'Far Side Virtual'*, as a work of experimental music, reveals how the production and audition of these sounds, as well as the activity of listening itself, have drastically changed in the contemporary context.

While John Cage's method of listening was a liberatory gesture within the context of the musical composition, it was also an act of enclosure. Even though Cage did not discriminate between intentional and unintentional sounds, or between music and noise, he also insisted, in numerous writings, that all sounds be removed of their contextual baggage when listened to within the setting of the composition. In a passage from 'Experimental Music: Doctrine', a manifesto-like statement playfully modelled after a dialogue between a Zen master and student, Cage naively asks: 'Then what is the purpose of this "experimental" music?' (1961b, p. 17). Answering his own question, now playing the role of the sage, he knowingly asserts: 'No purposes. Sounds' (1961b, p. 17).<sup>3</sup> Just 'Sounds'. With this single word Cage conceives of a music in which all sounds can be musical, existing as pure form or material, stripped of any reference or connotation. As Douglas Kahn asserts, this is *sound-in-itself*, sound as irreducible and unrepresentable (1999, p. 165).<sup>4</sup> These three words – 'No purposes. Sounds' – also reflect a transformation in the compositional process, which 'shift[s] the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition' (1999, p. 158). This method of focussed listening offered Cage a means to prevent subjectivity (of the composer or the listener) from shaping sound, or assigning a specific meaning to it, an ethic adopted from his own studies of Zen Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

Cage questions the expectation that a sound must communicate or signify in additional statements and lectures. In the 1957 talk, 'Experimental Music', Cage underlines this stance, stating: 'New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words' (1961b, p. 10). In this condition of 'new listening' sound should be carefully distinguished from language; the listener should experience sounds as they are, and not thrust specific meanings upon them. Cage further differentiates sound from language in 'Composition as Process', a series of three landmark lectures that the composer delivered in Darmstadt, Germany in 1958 (a key centre for avant-garde music in the 1950s). In the third section, aptly titled

‘Communication’, Cage issues a series of terse statements and questions that pit the terms ‘sound’, ‘music’ and ‘communication’ against one another:

Is communication something made clear?/What is communication?/Music, what does it communicate?/Is what's clear to me clear to you?/Is music just sounds?/Then what does it communicate?/Is a truck passing by music?/If I can see it, do I have to hear it too?/If I don't hear it, does it still communicate?/If while I see it I can't hear it, but hear something else, say an egg-beater, because I'm inside looking out, does the truck communicate or the egg-beater, which communicates?/Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?/Are the people inside the school musical and the ones outside unmusical? (1961a, 10)

While this passage exemplifies Cage’s stance against the expressive and, therefore, communicative use of sound, it also reflects the crucial discursive position functional sounds take in Cage’s theorisations of music and noise. In pitting ‘non-intentional’, functional sounds (the noise of an egg-beater or a truck) against intentional ones (music), Cage reveals not only the senselessness of these categories, but also how context is crucial to the act of listening. In these two related statements Cage’s theories about functional (‘non-intentional’) sounds closely parallel Marcel Duchamp’s artistic strategy of the readymade. Branden W. Joseph offers a succinct comparison of their artistic approaches in a passage relating the two artists:

[T]he “unmusical” “found” sound [...] whether as a natural occurrence or a noise generated by unconventional procedures – does not normally reside in a concert hall [or a composition], in much the same way that a urinal or a snow shovel [...] transgressed the conventional limits of the gallery or museum. (2008)

Consider the passage cited earlier in which Cage asks: ‘Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school? Are the people inside the school musical and the ones outside unmusical?’ Like Duchamp’s *Fountain*, Cage’s ‘sonic readymades’ question the institutional separations put between intentional and non-intentional sounds, that is, between music and noise, i.e. functional sounds.<sup>6</sup>

But what happens to these non-intentional sounds in practice? Are they cleansed of their original functional baggage when recontextualised in the framework of the composition or the concert hall? A comparison to Cage’s contemporary Pierre Schaeffer, the pioneer of *musique concrète*, who exploited the compositional possibilities of recording technologies such as the tape machine, reveals interesting similarities and staunch differences. Cage’s mantra ‘No purposes. Sounds’ surprisingly echoes Schaeffer’s words. In 1948 the French composer began his first experiments in *musique concrète* and soon after started publishing his theories on this new method of working with sound. Almost 20 years later in 1966 he posited the concept of the *objet sonore*, the sonic object of the telecommunications age. According

to Schaeffer, contemporary listeners primarily experience sounds acousmatically – through the ‘electronic curtain’ of recordings, radio and amplification. As the composer asserts, ‘[T]oday, it is the radio and the methods of reproduction, along with the whole set of electro-acoustic transformations, that place us, modern listeners to an invisible voice, under similar conditions’ (2006, p. 77). For Schaeffer, the *objet sonore* is autonomous; the product of electronic manipulation, it is freed from the reference to its original source, context or function, transforming into a completely new object that possesses a series of distinct acoustic qualities. As David Grubbs notes, while the two composers shared an interest in using recording technologies as instruments, championed the term ‘sound’ over ‘music’, and believed in the autonomy of sound, each conceived of ‘sound’ differently. Cage, in particular, disagreed with Schaeffer’s theory because it classified ‘sound’ according to a strict taxonomy (Grubbs, 2014, p. 58).

Given the theoretical and practical distinctions between their artistic methods, young musicians at the time received Cage and Schaeffer differently. Luc Ferrari, although beginning as Schaeffer’s associate in the 1950s, worked consistently against the dictates and methodology of *musique concrète* throughout the 1960s, incorporating longer selections of minimally processed sounds in his compositions, a transformation which culminated in his 1970 release ‘*Presque Rien No. 1: Le Lever du Jour au Bord de la Mer*’ (*Almost Nothing No. 1: Daybreak at the Seashore*). In a 1998 interview Ferrari reflects upon this change of direction and the influence of Cagean ‘listening’ upon this shift:

[E]arly on in *musique concrète*, I was one of the first to take the tape recorder outside the studio, and use sounds recorded outside, sounds from real life. I had a Nagra, one of the first portable machines. I started collecting sounds without any preconceived notions other than a desire to insert into musical discourse a sound that basically didn't belong there. As I said earlier, *musique concrète* was a kind of *abstractisation* [sic] of sound—we didn't want to know its origin, its causality [...] Whereas here I wanted you to recognise causality—it was traffic noise it wasn't just to make music with but to say: this is traffic noise! (Laughs) Cage’s influence, perhaps. (Warburton, 2014)

If Cage inspired Ferrari to retain the causality of sound within his compositions, one begins to deduce the exact meaning of Cage’s statement ‘No purposes. Sounds’, as well as the elder composer’s objections to concepts of signification and communication. ‘*Williams Mix*’ (conceived in 1952 and completed in 1953), a scored tape collage playable on four stereo playback machines, represents the particular kind of sonic autonomy that Cage sought. Flurries of distinct sounds, ranging from the musical (intentional) to the functional (non-intentional), are intercut with one another with no attention paid to narrative or structure. The effect is that of scanning across a radio dial.<sup>7</sup> At first, the non-intentional, functional sounds appear to be uprooted from their original context, separated from their ‘purpose’, and presented auto-

mously as material for formal investigation and enquiry. However, upon closer listening, these sounds are not fully subsumed within the larger musical structure; as Ferrari's words suggest, despite their context within a composition, the sounds that Cage used can still signify aspects of the world outside the composition, much like Duchamp's readymades still read as manufactured objects of everyday use even when sitting within the museum. Thus, like the readymades, these found functional sounds are only subtly recontextualised within the framework of the composition.<sup>8</sup> The perceived disorder of the compositional context makes the barely perceptible (or infra-slim, to use a Duchampian term) frame of the composition more apparent, much like Duchamp's readymades make the otherwise invisible context of art (and the concomitant expectations of art) evident. As a result, the functional, found and chance-derived sounds used in a Cage composition like *'Williams Mix'* simultaneously reflect their origins and their autonomy from their sources.

To return to the questions outlined at the beginning of this essay: Can this specific kind of autonomy sought by Cage's mode of listening be maintained today? Has listening (in the Cagean sense) changed and, if so, how? The career of James Ferraro, a young New York- and California-based musician, clarifies the historical and technological shifts that frame and inform these questions. Ferraro began his musical career as a member of the electro-acoustic noise duo Skaters. As participants in an international underground noise scene, the band circulated their work via self-produced CD-Rs and cassettes and performed in alternative spaces, lofts and living rooms across the country and overseas. Their live performances, comprised of electronics, tape manipulation, psychedelic drone and percussion, appeared improvisational and unscripted. After the group split in 2008, Ferraro embarked on a solo career in which he subjected pop music tropes to experimental processes. Culled from 'samples, loops, and the textures and aura of 80s pop – the kind heard on worn-out VHS tapes and glitchy video games' (Masters, n.d.), *'Night Dolls With Hairspray'* (released in 2010 on the Olde English Spelling Bee) represents the apex of this stylistic approach. Bathed in the fuzzy compressed sound of an overplayed cassette, Ferraro's flood of pre-2011 releases made him the cornerstone of 'hypnagogic pop', a genre assignation coined by writer David Keenan in 2009 to describe a movement of experimental musicians who were exploring the outmoded recording technologies of their youth alongside radio-friendly pop music styles.

As Marc Masters notes in his review of *'Night Dolls With Hairspray'*, 'Listening feels like peeking into the mind of a pop-culture-addled 80s teen' (n.d.). Like Cage, Ferraro composes by *listening*, absorbing not only the musical markers of a particular era – certain synthesizer tones, musical genres or vocal techniques – but also the aesthetic experience of listening in that era – in this instance, certain characteristics associated with cassette recording technology, the warm tone, the blurred edge of an edit or the pause of a deck. With the release of *'Far Side Virtual'* on October 25,

2011, Ferraro transitioned his focus from the distant analogue tape past to the more immediate digital one. This shift came along with a new affiliation, the Los Angeles-based label Hippos in Tanks, a home for an international pack of electronic musicians experimenting with dance and pop genres. The aesthetic of Hippos in Tanks is definitively post-Internet, tapping into a generation of millennials raised on the web; album covers range from Photoshop abstractions to clip art collages, while the sounds are first-generation digital, serving as backdrop for a nostalgic trip on an Internet littered with animated GIFs and Geocities websites. The 16 tracks of Ferraro's *'Far Side Virtual'* fall squarely in line with this aesthetic, featuring functional sounds from computer programmes and early digital MIDI instruments.

The record's second track, 'Global Lunch', offers a primary example. The shuffling rhythm is turned strange with the addition of a calm, affectless computerised, Siri-like voice, that asks the listener, 'Sir, would you like to read the New Yorker on your iPad?' Over the course of the track Ferraro builds up an impressively weighty palette of sounds, to an almost overwhelming degree. While the range of sounds is, as the title suggests, global, it is not a harmonious assembly; the clash of synthesised human voice, sitar and brass is grotesque, even tacky. Underneath the digital chaos percolates a sound familiar to many computer users: The Skype start-up sound. Ferraro smartly edits and loops it to help punctuate the track's rhythm. Much like Cage, Ferraro is compelled by 'non-intentional' sounds, in this case the functional dings, whistles, beeps and vocal prompts germane to the contemporary digital listening environment. However, this palette of sounds is far different from Cage's battery of non-musical sounds, which were collected from nature, body and machine. These digital sounds are designed and composed to serve purposes: To communicate, to notify, to greet, to warn.

While this class of digital functional sounds has a subtle presence on *'Far Side Virtual'*, they inform much of the record. In some instances these functional sounds do not appear to be 'functional' in their aesthetic, but rather musical; these include melodic mobile phone ringtones or idents (logo-like identifications) that often accompany computer programmes or streaming video services. In a 2011 interview from *Elle.com*, Ferraro acknowledges the importance of contemporary musical functional sounds to *'Far Side Virtual'*: '[The record is] mainly just trying to create some kind of symphonic music based off of ringtones or start-up chimes or computer noises and just things that are in our infrastructure' (Hoffman, 2011). What does it mean for Ferraro to frame these functional sounds of the digital infrastructure (some of which are already fairly musical) as music, let alone a symphony? On a computer, laptop or smartphone, the platforms on which many contemporary audiences listen to music, dings from the arrival of an e-mail or the melodic rings of a phone call often interrupt the listening experience, becoming enmeshed in the programmed composition.<sup>9</sup> The sounds coming from Spotify or iTunes, in which

sound is primary, merge with those from Skype, Gmail, Hulu, Netflix, a web browser or a video game, applications in which sound is an accessory. Both types of sound (one musical and one allegedly non-musical) are even made using the same instruments and tools. When *'Far Side Virtual'* is listened to in these digital environments, the experience can be uncanny, as the difference between these two apparently distinct classes of sound is hardly noticeable.

However, is this confusion due to a change in *where* listening occurs, or is it due to change in *what* is being listened to? Music and noise – clearly distinguished in Cage's time – have merged; electronic pulses and noises have become a part of pop music, while the noises and functional sounds of our digital infrastructure have become more musical. As noted earlier, within a digital music environment, many functional sounds – the ring of a telephone, the click of selecting something on a computer – are designed, none occurring as concomitant or as a result of another physical process, as in pre-digital functional sounds of the mechanical era. Consider the start-up sound for 'Windows 95' composed by Brian Eno, an acolyte of Cage, as well as British experimentalist Cornelius Cardew (Selvin, 2014). In a review, critic Brandon Soderberg (2011) forges a connection between *'Far Side Virtual'* and Eno, revealing the long-standing relationship between experimental music and this new class of composed digital functional sounds. One could also draw into this history unrecognised composers and sound designers whose work is heard on a daily basis, from Jim Reekes who composed the Mac start-up sound to James 'Andy' Moorer who, after spending time at electro-acoustic music hotbed IRCAM in the 1970s, wrote and developed the THX 'Deep Note' test sound featured at the beginning of many films (Whitwell, 2005a and b). Such relationships have even become part of experimental music legend; it is believed (though not proven) that embattled Danish experimental musician Goodiepal (born Paul Kristian Bjørn Vesper) composed sounds for Nokia and Sony as well as jingles for Carlsberg and Chupa Chups, eventually using them as sources for his own compositions.

*'Far Side Virtual'* not only acknowledges the cluttered contemporary digital listening environment, but also appears to celebrate music's loss of autonomy within it. In the *Elle.com* interview noted earlier, Ferraro states:

Hopefully these songs were made available for ringtone and the album will be condensed into ringtone format so the album won't be the centerpiece, it will just dissipate into the infrastructure. The record is just the contained gallery space of these ringtone compositions. (Hoffman, 2011)

In calling his record a 'gallery space of [...] ringtone compositions', Ferraro suggests that there is little difference between the 16 tracks of *'Far Side Virtual'* and functional ringtones, many of which are overtly musical and sometimes even assembled from recordings of pop songs. When listened to on a smartphone – today a common

platform for music listening – the digital functional sounds used in *'Far Side Virtual'* are subtly de- and recontextualised; they 'dissipate into the infrastructure' even though they are stripped of their function.<sup>10</sup> While the sounds might no longer indicate an arriving call on the phone, they easily mimic that function given that they play on the same platform. As Ferraro notes, his record is a 'gallery space' for these sounds, words that recall two figures in this history: Marcel Duchamp, who famously transformed manufactured non-art objects into art objects through the simple act of recontextualisation, and, of course, John Cage.

While one can argue that *'Far Side Virtual'* is a post-Internet realisation of Cage's call to dissolve the boundaries between music and noise in favour of undifferentiated sound, the record also wilfully ignores Cage's dictum, 'No purposes. Sounds'. Throughout Ferraro's record the digital platform of musical creation and audition is constantly referenced in the choice of sounds. Even though Cage employed recording technologies as instruments in a number of his compositions, there are only a few examples of self-reflexive gestures. While the shifts in speed that come from manipulating tape playback and turntables in *'Williams Mix'* and *'Imaginary Landscape No. 1'* (1939), respectively, foreground their corresponding methods of creation, Cage never intended his compositions to be distributed or presented via the same recording technology that he manipulated within the composition.<sup>11</sup> *'Williams Mix'* was for the context of the concert hall, while *'Imaginary Landscape No. 1'* was to be broadcast. Thus, like Duchamp's readymades and unlike Ferraro's digital functional sounds, Cage's sounds of recording technologies do not 'disappear into the infrastructure' of the radio broadcast or the concert hall. Removed from their contextual source, they are liberated and possess a degree of autonomy.

This difference in the degree of autonomy between Cage and Ferraro is less of a personal artistic choice, and more a reflection of the conditions of listening as well as the relationship between music production and recording technology, in each composer's respective time. While Cage sought to break the institutional boundary between music and noise as well as the medial distinction between live performance and recording, Ferraro lives in a technological moment in which these divisions no longer exist. Production (of both music and noise; intentional and non-intentional sound) and audition occur on a singular digital platform. Musicologist Annahid Kassabian has termed this contemporary condition 'ubiquitous listening', a phenomenon defined by the constant presence of music in the contemporary environment, which has transformed once 'intentional' sounds into functional ones (Kassabian, 2011). According to Kassabian, this condition is predicated on music's 'sourcelessness' in contemporary systems of distribution (2011). The meaning of terms originally employed by Cage has been reversed. While in his time noise – sound that institutionally lived *outside* music – was ubiquitous, today music – through digital production and distribution – is ubiquitous. It has become noise. Kassabian's arti-

cle complicates other accepted notions. She suggests that two opposed histories of ubiquitous listening have been put forth in the modern era – one a commercial/ industrial indebted to Muzak and an oppositional ‘counter-history’ that includes avant-garde composers such as Eric Satie and experimental musicians like Brian Eno, whose compositions toy with the possibility that music could become part of the environment, ‘disappear[-ing] into the infrastructure’ much like Ferraro’s functional sounds (Kassabian, 2011).

Cage forms a crucial link in Kassabian’s critical history of ubiquitous listening, but is one of the few overtly critical voices within it; in 1948 he proposed the stridently anti-commercial ‘*Silent Prayer*’, a 4’30” silent piece intended to disrupt the continuity of Muzak programming. However, despite Cage’s opposition to commerce, these two seemingly distinct histories of ubiquitous listening are deeply imbricated. The critical history includes figures like Eno, who openly participated in the creation of the contemporary commercial soundscape; the commercial history includes figures like Moorer, whose accomplishments are greatly indebted to the musical avant-garde. On ‘*Far Side Virtual*’ Ferraro honours the deep connection between these two histories that are often kept separate from one another, referencing both the avant-garde penchant for functional sounds as well as their commercial origins. In a playful press release conceived by Hippos in Tanks for Ferraro’s record, this corporate context is openly acknowledged:

*Far Side Virtual* takes us on a dance through some enigmatic modern metropolis, through the spaces of our consumerism, down a street that could be your 5th Avenue or your Regent Street or your Shibuya Square, to some anonymous globalized space in a common augmented Utopia [...] Imagine modern French chamber music remixed by iPod commercials and Macbook sound effects: minimized and deconstructed into chat function sound clips, an email alert blip, a ring tone or Apple Store automated door bells [...] *Far Side Virtual* is simply a symphony for our new click-of-a-button mode of consumption. A restrained type of minimal pop that spins full blast on Carrie Bradshaw’s iPod. A must have on the MP3 player for those globalized citizens active in the world today. (n.n., 2011)

In naming products and television characters alongside digital functional sounds, Ferraro’s promotional text alludes to the contemporary condition of artistic production and consumption in which experimentation and business are intertwined, a connection which Cagean experimentation wishes to forget. ‘*Far Side Virtual*’ is an acknowledgement of how a music listener, when listening today, on a computer, a smartphone or another digital device, is embedded within a larger economic system, in which commercial musical objects are purchased, traded or stolen.<sup>12</sup>

Released into an underground and experimental music world greatly indebted to Cage’s methods and theories, the reception of ‘*Far Side Virtual*’ was divided, primarily because of this abashed acknowledgement of commerce. Even positive reviews

pointed to how the record offered a ‘difficult’ listening experience (often a sign of success for an experimental record), given Ferraro’s studied use of overtly ‘commercial’ sounds. As Steve Shaw from the online music journal *FactMag* noted:

As a record it is so stuffed with wry observational interpretation and stylistic aggression – a primal audio mating of family-friendly comedy drama scores, functional infomercial beds and transitional fills for a million variations on *Sex & The City* – that, arguably, it is more a piece of art than a collection of music. The result is so extreme as to almost be offensive, and indeed, it probably will offend a lot of people. Gleefully so. (Stern, 2012, p. 224)

While Shaw might be picking up on Ferraro’s intentions towards art (the aforementioned ‘gallery space of ringtone compositions’), his comments reflect an inability to accept the record as ‘music’, an attitude shared by many in the experimental music community (notably those within the electro-acoustic improv circle), who envision their practice as resistant to commercial forces. In contrast, Ferraro’s ironic embrace of these very forces reads as complicit with them. The revered left-of-centre British music magazine *The Wire* nominated ‘*Far Side Virtual*’ as 2011’s ‘Record of the Year’, an act which provoked responses of disbelief. Looking at the online message board *I Hate Music*, one gage of issues and trends in the field of experimental music, a backlash towards the record was evident. In a thread dedicated to the year-end list, user *laughter\_CS* noted:

James Ferraro? That record sounds cheap and tossed together [...] maybe it's entertaining somehow, but there's nothing there that I'd count as 'the best,' unless we're arguing about the cheesiest and most insincere albums of the year.

User *FifePsy* added:

If you dig the music to Super Mario Sunshine and cheesy synth tones from the 80s then you may like this. I guess there is some conceptual underpinning/ironic commentary behind it all but i struggled to get all the way through it and had no desire to revisit.

Other reactions include ‘positively horrible’ (by user *Johnson*), ‘a one-time shtick’ (by user *anasara*) and ‘are they serious about the James Ferraro?’ (by user *billygomberg*) (*ihatemusic*, 2011)

These reactionary comments reveal a deep irony within the experimental music community: Listening – once a methodology, an approach or even an ethic towards music-making – has become a style, or worse, an orthodoxy with strictly defined parameters. Rather, in these appraisals of ‘*Far Side Virtual*’, a much larger question is eluded: Is Cage still applicable if the constructs on which his innovations are based no longer exist? In the uniform digital environment, is it possible to employ functional sounds as Cage once did, sited on the slim precipice between music and noise,

between autonomy and a sound's life in the world? While Cage sought to subtly decontextualise sound, highlighting the autonomy of the compositional context, 'Far Side Virtual' makes evident that this condition of autonomy is impossible to achieve in the contemporary listening environment, in which music and functional sounds co-exist, fused together as a single entity. Rather, 'Far Side Virtual' reveals a greater autonomous sphere, that of the digital music-making and -listening environment. If the experimental music community chooses to address this changed environment of production and consumption, it can no longer pretend to work outside of the commercial dictates of the digital environment; rather, using Ferraro's 'Far Side Virtual' as an example, this community should acknowledge this context and engage in a more concerted resistance within it.

## References

- Cage, John. (1961a). Composition as Process: III. Communication. In: *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Cage, John. (1961b). Experimental Music: Doctrine. In: *Silence*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Emarketer.com. (2013b). Younger Consumers Turn Up Digital Music Listening. www.emarketer.com. April 11, 2013. <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Younger-Consumers-Turn-Up-Digital-Music-Listening/1009800>. Accessed: July 12, 2014.
- Emarketer.com. (2013a). Music Goes Mobile as More Smartphone Users Stream Songs. www.emarketer.com. August 12, 2013. <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Music-Goes-Mobile-More-Smartphone-Users-Stream-Songs/1010126>. Accessed July 5, 2014.
- Factmag.com. (2011). James Ferraro unveils Far Side Virtual. www.factmag.com. September 23, 2011. <http://www.factmag.com/2011/09/23/james-ferraro-unveils-far-side-virtual/>. Accessed: July 9, 2014.
- Grubbs, David. (2014). *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties and Sound Recording*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Hoffman, Kelley. (October 25, 2011). James Ferraro's Versace Dreams. Elle.com.
- Ihatmusic.com. (n.d.). Wire Magazine Records of the Year 2011 (Spoilers). Ihatemusic. <http://ihatemusic.noquam.com/viewforum.php?f=3>
- Jones, Caroline A. (1993). Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego. *Critical Inquiry*, 19(4).
- Joseph, Branden W. (2008). *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*. New York: Zone Books.
- Kahn, Douglas. (1999). *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kassabian, Annahid. (2011). UbiSub: Ubiquitous Listening and Networked Subjectivity. *Echo: a music-centered journal*, 3(2).
- Kassabian, Annahid. (2013). *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Masters, Marc. (n.d.). James Ferraro, Night Dolls with Hairspray. www.pitchfork.com. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15643-nightdolls-with-hairspray-on-air/>. Accessed: July 4, 2014.
- Metzger, Heinz-Klaus. (1997). Trans. by Ian Pepper. John Cage, or Liberated Music. *October* 82 (Fall 1997).

- Pisaro, Michael. (2011). *Nicht alles, nicht nichts: etwas*. The opposing tensions of John Cage's 0'00 and Roratorio, *Tacet* 1.
- Schaeffer, Pierre. (2009 [1966]). *Acousmatics*. In: Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Selvin, Joel. (1996). Q and A With Brian Eno. SFGate.com. June 2, 1996. <http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Q-and-A-With-Brian-Eno-2979740.php>. Accessed: July 11, 2014.
- Soderberg, Brandon. (November 4, 2011). Review of Far Side Virtual. Pitchfork.com. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15992-james-ferraro-far-side-virtual/>. Accessed: July 11, 2014.
- Sterne, Jonathan. (2012). *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Warburton, Dan. (n.d.). Luc Ferrari, Paris Transatlantic. <http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/ferrari.html>. Accessed: July 3, 2014.
- Whitwell, Tom. (2005a). Tiny Music Makers Pt. 3: The THX Sound. Musicthing.co.uk. May 25, 2005a. <http://musicthing.blogspot.de/2005/05/tiny-music-makers-pt-3-thx-sound.html>. Accessed: July 11, 2014.
- Whitwell, Tom. (2005b). Tiny Music Makers Pt. 4: The Mac Startup Sound. Musicthing.co.uk. May 26, 2005b. <http://musicthing.blogspot.com/2005/05/tiny-music-makers-pt-4-mac-startup.html>. Accessed: July 11, 2014.

## Notes

- 1 As Kahn states: 'Cage's musical renovation was built on a larger cultural association in which listening was thought to be intrinsically more passive, peaceful, respectful, democratic and spiritual than speaking' (1999, p. 197).
- 2 Grubbs' (2014) primary focus is a number of Cage's statements in which he proclaims his resistance to the distribution of musical recordings. As Grubbs expertly demonstrates, Cage's critique of recording technologies is more nuanced. The composer used them in both indeterminate and change-base compositions, and also released recordings beginning in the 1960s which played with the conventions of musical recording.
- 3 In 'Composition as Process III: Communication', a lecture delivered in April 1958 at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ and in September 1958 in Darmstadt, Germany, Cage issued a tirade of questions, many of which aimed to disturb the defined boundaries between music, noise and sound. In it he asks: 'Music, what does it communicate? Is what's clear to me clear to you? Is music just sounds? Then what does it communicate?' (1961a, p. 41). Further on he suggests, 'Do you mean to say it's [i.e., music is] a purposeless play?' (1961a, p. 43).
- 4 Here Kahn employs Immanuel Kant's notion of the 'das Ding an sich' (i.e., 'thing-in-itself', noumena) which is contrasted with the thing-as-observed (i.e., phenomena).
- 5 Douglas Kahn notes, 'Cage was less interested in getting the ego out of the way to enable the unconscious to come out into the world than in removing the ego so more of the world get *in* unobstructed' (1999, p. 176). See also: Jones (1993).
- 6 Thanks to my colleague Lindsay Caplan for suggesting this term.
- 7 To make 'Williams Mix' Cage along with a number of assistants painstakingly edited a total of over 600 different kinds of recordings, including bursts of static, music, radio chatter and field recordings (those most recognisable are the croaks of frogs). While close in process to *musique concrète*, the experience is far different in how sounds are arranged. Compared with Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's 'Symphonie pour un Homme Seul' (1949-1950), 'Williams Mix' is far less musical, with motifs repeated and overlaid almost randomly. Schaeffer and Henry employ some of the very same kinds of sounds as Cage (avant-garde musical motifs, vocals – sung and spoken – and electronic sounds); however, they are organised sequentially, evoking the

expected narrative structure of 'music'. This further specifies the kind of autonomy sounds possess in Cage's compositions.

- 8 Composer Michael Pisaro (2011, pp. 110-125) uses the Derridean term of the *passe-partout* to articulate how Cage frames different bodies of sound in two compositions.
- 9 According to eMarketer.com (2013b), a digital marketing research company, more than half of US consumers from the ages of 13 to 35 listen to music on digital platforms.
- 10 According to eMarketer.com (2013a), by 2017 a third of the US population will be listening to music on their mobile phones.
- 11 This might also be a result of Cage's recorded output, which in the 1960s was scant and only grew over the subsequent years (Grubbs, 2014).
- 12 Jonathan Sterne (2012, p. 224) describes the distribution of MP3s as a 'social circulation'.