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Introduction

In an anthology of essays on the topic of materiality in art, the art historian Petra Lange-Berndt poses the question, “What does it mean to give agency to the material, to follow the material and to act *with* the material?” (Lange-Berndt 2015, 13). While the focus of Lange-Berndt’s consideration of materiality falls largely on the visual arts, unpicking this single question identifies a number of subsidiary issues that I would like address in relation to the sonic arts: firstly, what might acting *with* the material sound like; and secondly, what is at stake in this acting *with* (or as Lange-Berndt puts it, “what does it mean”). I aim to consider these questions by way of a critical engagement with two specific pieces of sonic art: John Oswald’s 1998 reworking of Walter Ruttmann’s 1930 radio documentary *Weekend*, entitled *wknd 58*; and the CD *Blank Tapes*, released by the experimental music group Reynolds in 2000. Both projects, I argue, propose a form of creative practice in which the respective artists might be understood to follow and act with sonic materials rather than simply treating them as resources through which a project is realised. In this way I propose that both *wknd 58* and *Blank Tapes* can be heard as a radical break with what Jean-François Lyotard characterises as the tradition of modernity, in which “the relationship between human beings and materials is fixed by the Cartesian program of mastering and possessing nature” (Lyotard 1985, 47). Lange-Berndt’s question also raises the issue of the ways in which materials themselves might be understood to have agency, rather than it being gifted by the artist (gifting being implied in the question “what does it mean to give agency to the material”). Here I would like to consider the resistance of sonic materials to certain forms of artistic manipulation, and how this resistance might be understood within the context of material agency—a notion of agency proposed by Karen Barad in her memorable comment, “there is a sense in which ‘the world kicks back’” (Barad 1998: 112). In thinking through what is at stake in a *working with* the material, I argue that by making material resistance audible, both *wknd58* and *Blank Tapes* propose a radical politics (and perhaps poetics) of listening. This political dynamic emerges in the interaction between artist and the material, and has the potential to challenge anthropocentric forms of thought deeply embedded in dominant notions of musical authorship, thereby reimagining and recalibrating the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

Agency and the material

Lange-Berndt's question echoes developments in critical theory that have emerged as part of, and in the wake of, New Materialist scholarship. According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost a distinctive theme of this body of thought is "an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (Coole and Frost 2010, 7). Conventionally, the notion of agency has been associated with the human subject—a view which is summarised by Coole and Frost in the following terms: "agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption [is] that humans have the right or ability to master nature" (ibid., 10). However, the nonhuman *also* has the capacity to be transformative without external agency. As Christoph Cox argues, "It is not difficult to see that nature is extravagantly creative, endlessly generating an immense variety of inorganic and organic forms: from crystals and canyons to biological species of the most astonishing variety" (Cox 2011, 151). For Bruno Latour, objects might also be considered to have agency in the way in which they participate in the course of an action: "things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour 2005, 72). Thus, for Latour, agency can be observed in any thing that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference (ibid., 71). While here Cox and Latour figure nonhuman agency in relation to nature and objects, it might also be argued that matter can be considered to possess agency in its capacity to act in ways that produce a particular effect, either independently of human intervention, or within an interaction that occurs between the human and the nonhuman. While Lange-Berndt does not explicitly align her own commentary on materiality with New Materialism, she nevertheless also proposes that agentic potential might be attributed to matter itself: "Clearly materials have agency, they can move as well as act and have a life of their own, challenging an anthropocentric post-Enlightenment intellectual tradition" (Lange-Berndt 2015, 16). Within the sonic arts a similar recognition of nonhuman agency has been articulated by composer Annea Lockwood in relation to the project *A Sound Map of the Danube* (2008). Reflecting on the field recordings of the river that constitute the central part of the piece, Lockwood comments: "Towards the end of the final field trip, while listening to small waves slap into a rounded overhang the river had carved in a mud bank in Rasova, Romania ... I realised that the river has agency; it composes itself, shaping its sounds by the way it sculpts its banks" (Lockwood 2008).

As Lange-Berndt suggests, attributing agency to a nonhuman other, in the way proposed by Lockwood, challenges anthropocentric forms of thinking—including what Leotard describes as the "Cartesian program of mastering and possessing nature" (Leotard 1985, 47). Applying this approach to thinking about the agentic potential of the materials with which an artist works presents a radical revision of the notion of agency which, as suggested above, has traditionally been associated with human activities and capabilities. Thus, addressing the possibility of nonhuman agency, Karen Barad comments: "From a humanist perspective the question of nonhuman agency may seem a bit queer, since agency is generally associated with issues of subjectivity and intentionality. However, if agency is understood as an enactment and not something someone has, then it seems not only appropriate but important to consider nonhuman and cyborgian forms of agency as well as human ones" (Barad 1998, 112). Crucially, for Barad, agency is not something that either the human or nonhuman simply possesses. Rather, she proposes, "Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of 'subjects' or 'objects'" (ibid.). Barad

thus redefines agency as a matter of intra-action: a neologism signifying what she describes as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (Barad 2007, 33).

Drawing on these ideas, the notion of nonhuman agency can be used to consider the ways in which material resistance emerges and becomes audible within the context of a relationship that is developed between the artist and the material through creative practice, and by thinking through what Barad describes as “enactment” in terms of mutual interactions between artistic intervention and material integrity. It is within these interactions that material resistance can emerge as a particular form of nonhuman agency. If resistance is understood as the impeding or stopping effect exerted on an object or substance by another (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010), then material resistance might be thought of as the capacity of a material to impede the artist’s efforts to master or control it. The interaction here between the artist and the material is not the reciprocal, complementary, symbiotic and negotiated relationship implied by an anthropocentric notion of affordance, in which an environment, material or technology is seen, ultimately, to meet human needs in the capacity of a resource. Rather, the notion of material resistance signals an interaction between the artist and the material in which matter’s intractability and inertia may largely determine the outcome of actions undertaken or initiated by the artist. Material resistance thus may be understood as an entanglement of agencies that is weighted towards the material: an interaction in which matter is no longer understood in anthropocentric terms as raw material to be given form and meaning by the artist, but rather, one in which the material declares its ontological independence and integrity.

The issue of what constitutes the material in relation to sound needs perhaps some discussion, since not only is sound commonly understood to be immaterial, but also because the word hosts a range of different meanings. In the works that I examine here, there are two ways in which I propose sound might be considered “material” beyond the general sense in which the term is used to describe the resources an artist draws upon in their work (the sense, for example, that stories, memories or words are the “material” with which a writer works). At one level, the notion of materiality as it relates to *wknd 58* and *Blank Tapes* may seem relatively unproblematic, since both projects draw upon sonic materials that at some point existed in physical form: a copy of Ruttmann’s *Weekend* archived on 78rpm shellac records in the case of Oswald’s piece, and six blank audio cassette tapes for Reynolds’ CD project. Here, material objects underpin sound’s claim to materiality, heard in the sounds and sonic qualities produced by the technology itself (noise), and the ways in which recorded sounds are rendered by that technology (timbre, dynamic range, frequency range, etc.). This simple formulation, however, ignores the sense in which sound itself might be considered material. My own approach to this issue is informed partly by ideas proposed within Structuralist Materialist filmmaking, summarised in Peter Gidal’s pithy statement “Material must not mean that which you can touch, some object” (Gidal 1989, 46). In their engagement with the material qualities of film, Structural Materialist filmmakers like Gidal often focused on the medium’s physical substrate and its unique photochemical properties—revealed in visual qualities of the projected image, such as grain, colour, movement and flicker. Thus the visual qualities of the projected image are understood to constitute an important part of film’s materiality. However, the strip of celluloid is not only the material foundation for the cinematic image, but also determines a film’s structure in time. Accordingly, Gidal

proposes that duration can be understood as a material piece of time and thus a constituent element of film's materiality (Gidal 1975, 191).

Drawing on the work of Pierre Schaeffer, the notion of materiality proposed by Structural Materialist filmmaking can be rendered in sonic terms. Schaeffer's concept of reduced listening, in which the listener attends to the traits or qualities of a sound, independent of the source or the meaning of a sound, produces a new domain of sound, referred to by Schaeffer as *objets sonore*, or sonic objects (Schaeffer, 2017). Taking Schaeffer's lead, if sound can be listened to and conceptualised as a concrete sonic event, dissociated from its representational functions, then materiality can be registered in terms of a sound's complexity, amplitude, its tonal qualities, timbre, duration, development over time, and so on. In this way the notion of sonic materiality might then refer to the specific qualities, states, forms and structures of particular sounds and the ways in which these relate to a sound recording's physical substrate or its diffusion. In this sense, then, the material with which a sonic artist works can be considered material, and it is this materiality that I would like to consider in specific works that might be understood to exhibit or foreground material agency.

wknd 58—John Oswald, 1998

Commissioned by Bavarian broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk for the project Walter Ruttmann Weekend Remix, Oswald's *wknd 58* revisits one of the seminal works of early sound art. The piece differs somewhat from Oswald's more familiar work in plunderphonics in that the source material is drawn from an experimental radio documentary rather than the recordings of popular and classical music that have served as the staple of most of Oswald's published output to date. The original copy of Ruttmann's *Weekend* is considered lost, but the piece survives in the form of a recording made on three single-sided 78rpm shellac discs rediscovered in New York in 1978 (Drössler 2009). What one hears in the recording is thus not only the sounds of Berliners at work and play that Ruttmann captured and assembled for the programme, but also the noise inherent in both the original Triergon¹ sound recordings and the second generation copy made on disc. These noises, which are generated in the encounter between a physical substrate and the various technologies that render a recording audible, are referenced in Barbara Schäfer's liner notes for the CD release of *wknd 58*: "The basis for the remix by the Canadian John Oswald was the loud noise on the copy of the 1930 original. Oswald's remix conducted a digital material battle with the original, one which duplicated in Ruttmann's discontinuous rhythm the copying noises which had developed over time" (Schäfer 2000). Thus Schäfer constructs Oswald's relationship with the source material in combative terms. However, I would argue that this interpretation of the piece misunderstands the nature of Oswald's work here, and thereby misses or obscures what is perhaps the most radical aspect of *wknd 58*: that is, a form of creative practice that addresses the question of what it means for an artist to act *with* the material, and which enables us to hear what I propose is a politics of listening.

¹ Ruttmann used the Triergon optical film sound recording system to record sound for the programme. Recording on film rather than on disc allowed Ruttmann to apply the editing techniques he had developed in cinema to radio. Hence *Weekend* is sometimes referred to as a "blind" film or a film without images.

The manipulation of source materials undertaken in Oswald's plunderphonics work evidences highly developed forms of artistic control, achieved primarily through the application of montage editing. While acknowledging the influence that William Burroughs' use of the cut-up technique had on his own creative practice, Oswald nevertheless sees his own approach to montage as differing in significant ways from that proposed by Burroughs: "[his] search for the random aspect of juxtaposition and cut-ups was completely contrary to my attempt to control the cut-up effect and make very careful choices as to which words go together" (Oswald, 2002, 48). The degree of precision brought to bear on Oswald's reworking of other artists' material is indicated by his comment that in the early 1970s he sometimes worked with pieces of recording tape one-eighth of an inch wide, containing a mere ten milliseconds of sound (Oswald 2001, 8). Critics have often conceptualised the radical modification of existing music that results from the application of these techniques as a form of assault on both the original material, and by extension, the artist being "electroquoted". Thus music critic David Keenan writes, "Perpetrated against select icons of popular culture such as Michael Jackson, Dolly Parton and Jim Morrison, his plunderphonic music has been lauded as a great act of sonic vandalism aimed at dislodging mass culture's colonisation of the sound environment" (Oswald 2002, 43).

When conceptualised as an attack on hegemonic cultural objects, it is easy to see how Oswald's approach to music might be understood in political terms: that is, as an assault on what Horkheimer and Adorno termed the "Culture Industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). According to Oswald, however, the motivation behind plunderphonics has never been a destructive desire to mutilate the original: "I love the music. In my mind, it's certainly not an act of vandalism.... I don't think of it as an attempt to perpetrate any sort of damage ... either to the artist's reputation or to the music that I'm using" (Oswald 2002, 43). If these comments provide a general sense of the attitude Oswald adopts to his source materials, then another made in relation to *dab* (1989)—his reworking of Michael Jackson's *Bad* (1987)—offers an important insight into Oswald's creative approach to working with recorded sound: "I was hoping that he would be flattered. I likewise think that *dab* flatters him. With the exception of a few suggestive lines like 'your butt is love', it all seems to be an intensification of qualities i [sic] found in 'Bad'" (Oswald 2001, 28).

This relationship with sonic material, in which Oswald seeks to respond creatively to the qualities he perceives within it, is clearly evident in the way in which noise is treated in *wknd 58*. Like *dab*, the piece can be heard as an intensification of the qualities Oswald hears in the original: in this case an intensification of the noise on the source recording. Throughout the piece Oswald's foregrounding of this particular sound is uncompromising, but one particular section of the composition stands out as being almost completely dominated by the noise in the source material (Oswald 2000a, 3:15). Here fragments of music, speech and other sounds recognisable from Ruttman's original programme recede so far into the background of the piece that they become virtually inaudible. That Oswald has employed montage as a structuring device in *wknd 58* is evident from the repetition of a number of sounds selected from the original programme: for example, the sounds of a hammer striking metal, a circular saw, and a music student practising scales. This repetition offers evidence to the listener that the source material has been manipulated and reworked. However, in those sections which focus on the noise of the original recording, authorial intervention is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain. Here it is hard to know or to hear exactly how Oswald has worked on the material; or put another way, the noise maintains

its identity despite the fact that Oswald has worked on it. By simply listening to this section of the piece it is difficult to determine whether Oswald has adopted his usual approach to editing, since the unpitched hissing, crackling, rumbling sounds produced by the combination of 1930s film stock and shellac disc is continuous and relatively stable—thus rendering any attempt at montage inaudible. One thing this suggests is that this material is difficult to work with: it is self-organising, resistant and resilient, and has the capacity to reduce or even remove the artist’s capacity to exert significant control over it.

This quality of material resistance is further evidenced in comments made by Oswald in relation to his composition *anon* (1990), which draws on tapes of music by singer-songwriter Tim Buckley:

The Buckley tapes were hissy, and this was particularly distracting while the various layers were being introduced, so we used the same trick that Buckley had employed for the recording of his song ‘Love from Room 109 at The Islander (On Pacific Coast Highway)’; which only existed as a noisy master: he added the sound of surf, to great effect, since the waves mask the tape hiss. We added some of this same surf sound to *anon*, plus some thunderstorm effects from yet another Doors song. (Oswald 2001, 8)

As those who have experience of analogue noise reduction will know, attempts to filter out tape hiss inevitably impact upon the way in which other sounds in a recording are rendered. The solution apparently adopted by both Buckley and Oswald is to mask rather than attempt to remove or even reduce the noise created by magnetic tape—in effect camouflaging the noise by adding a “representational” sound with similar qualities, and thus working *with* the noise rather than working *on* it. If this intractability is heard as the sound of the world kicking back, to rework Barad’s memorable phrase, then here is one way in which sound might be understood to manifest material resistance, and thus agency. Crucially, in *wknd 58* this agency emerges within the relationship that is forged between Oswald and the material with which he works, whereby the noise on the source material is given the time and space to be heard on something approaching its own terms. This indeed appears to be acknowledged by Oswald, who writes of this piece, “There is constant noise on the recording, and that’s what I had to work with. Instead of trying to eliminate it as completely as possible by technical means, I decided to do the opposite” (Oswald 2000b).

Blank Tapes—Reynols, 2000

Adopting an even more radical approach to the way in which agency is shared with the material, the CD *Blank Tapes* works exclusively with the sound of blank audio cassette tape, featured in six tracks varying in length from three-and-a-half to eleven minutes. Released by the Argentinian experimental music group Reynols (Alan Courtis, Roberto Conlazo and Miguel Tomasin), the CD offers the listener very little contextual information, although the following production details are included in the brief liner notes: “This piece was made only with

analog & digital processings over selected blank tapes dating from 1978 to 1999” (Reynols, 2000). The fact that some processing of the source material has been undertaken becomes evident on comparing the six tracks, since each has its own distinctive sound qualities. Thus, while the first track of the CD is relatively quiet, with little variation over the course of its three-and-a-half minute duration, track five features a densely textured rumbling reminiscent of the analogue distortion that results from tape saturation. Similarly, on track two the volume level of the recording is manipulated to impart a wavering quality, suggestive of wind gently rustling the leaves of a tree.

When listening to some of the individual tracks, however, there is relatively little audible evidence of manipulation of the source material. Only by fast-forwarding or scrubbing through these particular tracks does it become evident that the recordings have been transformed in subtle ways: primarily through changes in volume, and by the filtering of particular frequencies. Heard in real time many of these changes are virtually inaudible, and perhaps more importantly do not radically alter the identity of the source material. That is, the recordings of blank audio cassette tape that constitute the album do indeed sound like blank audio cassette tape. Of course, the sound of any blank cassette contains a number of constituent elements: not only the characteristic hiss created by the particles of oxide coating the polyester tape, but also various forms of system noise generated by motors, electrical circuits, tape transport mechanisms, and so on. Hence filtering can be used to selectively emphasise the buzz and hum generated by the electrical and mechanical components of the cassette playback mechanism, rather than those associated with the magnetic tape itself—as is the case on the final track of the album. Even where the dynamic shifting of frequency range through filtering becomes audible, there is a sense in which Reynols are working to uncover and reveal what is embedded within the sound of blank tape, peeling back the layers of sound to uncover sonic qualities that are not normally consciously attended to.

As with Oswald’s *wknd 58*, the sounds that Reynols are working with demonstrate a form of material resistance or resilience, primarily in the maintenance of an identity which remains intact despite the various forms of processing that they undergo. However, key to this is the relationship established by Reynols with the source materials. Rather than displaying overt mastery over the material, Reynols have chosen instead to opt for a modest and often inaudible form of manipulation that sometimes feels like little more than presentation. This results in a project marked by a radical literality, whereby materials are allowed to speak for themselves.

The fact that the blank tapes used for the project date from 1978 to 1999 brings a historical dimension to the project, which might usefully be considered in relation to the changing audibility of what I have described elsewhere as “the sound of technology” (Birtwistle 2010). The fact that *Blank Tapes* was issued on compact disc signals the fact that by 2000 analogue audio formats were being replaced by various digital alternatives. Audible changes in the sound of technology, such as those we hear in the move from shellac to vinyl, and with the introduction of magnetic tape and the compact disc, serve to differentiate not only different formats and media, but also historical periods. In some forms of creative practice this inscription of difference works to generate a sense of pastness, which may in turn make a significant contribution to the affective impact of a piece—as in the work of Philip Jeck, for example. However, within the context provided by the *Blank Tapes* project, the sound of technology does not seem to evoke or convey a particularly strong sense of the past. Rather, it is the compact

cassette's low-fi materiality that appears to underpin the creative dynamic of this particular project. Thus when asked by an interviewer how the tapes for the *Blank Tapes* album were selected, the group commented: "We made a selection of very expensive and very cheap tapes ... The cheap tapes sound better than the expensive ones. TTK tapes from Singapore. Maxwell tapes (not Maxell!) from Taiwan. We used a lot of Argentinian brands, very strange brands. Specially the cheapest, most hissy" (Reynols 2003). Straddling analogue and digital technologies, *Blank Tapes* harks back to a sound that was gradually beginning to disappear in a period when digital technology was becoming increasingly ubiquitous. One effect of this technological change is that in an age of digital sound, analogue noise is no longer familiar and "inaudible". In a predominantly digital soundscape the tape hiss assembled on *Blank Tapes* is thus heard and appreciated in new ways. In this sense the passage of time re-energises these sounds, and in increasing their audibility gives them greater agency. For the artist working with archival material (*wknd 58*), or dated and obsolete technologies (*Blank Tapes*), temporal displacement amplifies the sound of technology, thereby materialising or rematerialising the sounds with which they work.

Listening to material resistance

The importance of noise in the two works discussed above suggests noise theory as the most obvious resource for thinking through the political dynamic of Oswald's and Reynols' practice. For example, drawing on Jacques Attali's foundational text *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), it would be possible to offer productive readings of both works in terms of the ways in which each breaks with musical convention, the use of sound as a kind of assault or attack (as is commonly proposed in relation to Oswald's plunderphonics), resistance to certain forms of musical signification, and so on. However, while this approach might help make a case for the work being understood as radical in terms of artistic practice—at least historically—I propose that the concept and practice of *listening* offers an alternative and productive means by which to navigate the political potential of Oswald's and Reynols' work.

Discourse on the politics of listening forms an important strand within what Tanja Dreher and Poppy de Souza have identified as a "turn to listening" in media studies, cultural studies and political theory (Dreher and de Souza 2018). The last decade has witnessed a deepening interest in listening within the arts and humanities, marked by publications, conferences and exhibitions—some of which have focused on the ways in which listening might be understood in political terms.² Much of this wide-ranging body of scholarship locates issues of

² These include: *HLYSNAN: The Notion and Politics of Listening* [exhibition]. 2013. Casino Luxembourg, Luxembourg. 17 May - 7 September; Carlyle, Angus and Cathy Lane, eds. 2013. *On Listening*. Axminster: Uniformbooks; Lacey, Kate. 2013. *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity; Stoeber, Jennifer Lynn. 2016. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press; Barlow, Anne, ed. (2016) *What Now? The Politics of Listening*. London: Black Dog Publishing; *The Politics of Listening* [conference]. 2018. University of New South Wales, Sydney, 29-30 November.

political agency and the radical potential of listening within a social context. Thus, conceptualising sound as a “relational intensity”, sound studies scholar Brandon LaBelle proposes that listening has the potential to create a social body, defined by what he terms “radical sharing” (LaBelle 2014, 20). Similarly, Dreher’s work in media studies constructs the politics of listening in terms of the ways in which “conventions, institutions and privileges ... shape who and what can be heard in media” (Dreher 2010, 85), while thinking in particular about the responsibility of broadcasters and audiences to listen to the voices of marginalised groups. As Dreher puts it, “To focus on listening poses the question of change in terms of learning new ways for the centre to hear rather than simply requiring the marginalized to speak up” (ibid., 99). Within arts practice, the politics of listening has been examined by artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan in relation to the ways in which speech is heard or listened to within various politicised contexts: for example, the role of voice in law, and the changing nature of testimony in an era of digital technology. Thus for Abu Hamdan the politics of listening is understood as “an intervention into, and a reorganisation of, the forms of listening to speech itself” (Abu Hamdan 2016, 46).

What this highly selective sample of work on the politics of listening shares is a focus on human agency and the social—which is to say, politics as understood within a wholly anthropocentric context. However, recent scholarship in the field of GeoHumanities provides an alternative way of thinking about the political potential of listening, and in particular that scholarship which is concerned with the relationship between arts practice and the environment. Here I would like to draw on the idea of listening to nonhuman others explored by Julian Brigstocke and Tehseen Noorani in their research project Participation’s “Others”: A Cartography of Creative Listening Practices. This project sets out with the aim of “challenging the place occupied by the individual living human subject as the paradigmatic form of political and artistic agency” (Brigstocke 2014), and raises the question of how we might think and do otherwise: “Critical and politically engaged research has often been described in terms of giving voice to marginalized subjects. What happens, though, when we attempt to attune ourselves to forms of agency that do not possess a conventionally recognized voice to be amplified?” (Brigstocke and Noorani 2016, 2).

The practice of listening to the nonhuman other, I would argue, is exactly what takes place in both *Blank Tapes*, and in that section of *wknd 58* in which Oswald clears space for noise. Further, the relationship engendered between artist and material might be understood appropriately, in the terms proposed by Brigstocke and Noorani, as “attunement”: that is, as “a form of embodied relationality and interconnectedness that capacitates individual empathy and grounds the possibility of coproduction” (Brigstocke and Noorani 2016, 1). If, then, *wknd 58* and *Blank Tapes* is what following the material and working with the material sounds like, we might now return to Lange-Berndt’s original question and consider what precisely is at stake here.

What we hear in Oswald and Reynolds working *with* the material is a radical reorientation of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, articulated and enacted through a shift of focus from authorship and human agency to sonic materiality and material agency. Of course, Oswald and Reynolds engineer the conditions within which this takes place, but in so doing reduce their own presence by producing work in which material resistance emerges as a form of nonhuman agency. This rescaling of human agency and authorship might be understood as a principled relationship with the material, and is echoed in comments made

by Oswald: “i have the feeling that the compositions are trying to say something, not i. This is an illusion of course, and i am willful and manipulative and yearning on many levels, but the process is nonetheless more about the piece establishing its acoustic individuality than it is about my extramusical concerns” (Oswald 2001, 43).³ Similarly, in Reynolds’ work we might understand the artistic intervention made on the material to be a form of sympathetic curation rather than radical transformation. In both cases we have a clear articulation of a desire to *listen to* sound rather than *speaking through* it. In many ways this realises a potentially radical mode of listening described by Christoph Cox in the following terms: “A fully materialist conception of listening would level the ontological field, rejecting the ancient metaphysical hierarchy that elevates the human above the animal, the inanimate, and the mechanical, and would reconceive listening in terms of capturing (and being captured by) flows of sound rather than in terms of some uniquely human intentionality” (Cox 2016, 23).

To listen is to make space and time for the other—the flip side of which is a reduction or rescaling of the self. As John Cage puts it in *45’ For A Speaker*, “No one can have an idea once he really starts listening” (Cage 1999, 191). This take on listening is echoed by scholars working on its political dimensions, including LaBelle, who writes, “in listening one is situated within an extremely relational instant, one conditioned by the silence of thought” (LaBelle 2018, 8) and, “listening is a position of *not knowing*; it is to stand *in wait* for the event, for the voice that may come” (LaBelle 2014, 21). Similarly, drawing on the work of Susan Bickford (1996), Dreher suggests, “listening requires the listener to quiet their inner voice and to listen is to leave oneself open to persuasion. Listening thus entails an incompleteness, an openness to the other” (Dreher 2010, 100). Importantly, Dreher continues, “It is also challenging in that it opens up possibilities—for learning and connection, but also for challenge, conflict, dissonance and persuasion.” It is this sense of dissonance, I argue, that underpins the radical political dynamic of Oswald’s work in *wknd 58*, and Reynolds’ *Blank Tapes*. This is not sonic dissonance in the Attalian sense, but rather dissonance understood in terms of a relationship established between the artist and the material.

As suggested above, the noise encountered in *wknd 58* and *Blank Tapes* is difficult to work with: it is resistant, resilient, and recalcitrant. Taking a lead from Lange-Berndt, this inertia might be understood as a form of material agency: “Clearly materials have agency, they can move as well as act and have a life of their own” (Lange-Berndt 2015, 16). However, what we hear in *wknd 58* is a kind of intractability that might be usefully be characterised in terms of *indifference*; that is, indifference of the material to the work of the artist and to their presence. Here the politics of listening does not turn around the notion of “radical empathy” (LaBelle 2014, 22), but rather its opposite. Importantly, this indifference of the nonhuman other to the human is also an articulation of radical difference or radical otherness, and as such is potentially, at least, a powerful corrective to anthropocentrism. That is, material resistance serves as a marker of the limits of human agency, and a corrective to those notions of mastery and control which construct the material as something to be given form and meaning through human intervention. This is important in political terms since, as Brigstocke and Noorani point out, anthropocentric forms of thinking and politics have had alarming consequences for environmental, social and mental ecologies (Brigstocke and Noorani 2016, 1). Thus to listen in the way suggested by Oswald and Reynolds’

³ Here it is worth noting that Oswald’s desire to rescale the self is also enacted through his use of a lower case “i” as a personal pronoun.

creative practice might be thought of as a political act in its own right. Here we encounter projects that propose other ways for us to listen, and in so doing have the potential to radically realign the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, and to offer a glimpse of an alternative way of being in the world.

A note on the sound files

The sound files accompanying the written text were recorded on a range of cassette tape and digital recorders. Each of the source recordings was dubbed multiple times until traces of audible speech were lost. The aim of these recordings is to realise, through creative practice, ideas regarding nonhuman agency discussed in the written text.

Credits:

Track 1: Philips Pocket Memo LFH 0085 and LFH 585 dictation recorders

Track 2: Two Bush CRS-132 Cassette Player/Recorders

Track 3: Two Hanimex 2040 AV Synchrocorder Cassette Tape Recorders

Track 4: Philips EL3301 and Elizabethan LZ9102 cassette recorders

Track 5: Miruku TCM-6205 digital media player and Dreamry Digital Voice Recorder

Tapes: PMD Magnetics Ferric 120 μ S IEC1 C15 Professional Audiocassettes; Realistic Mini Cassette 30 for rim drive recorders; Maxell UR C90 IEC Type 1/Normal EQ 120 μ S audiocassette.

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