I recall a course on sound art and the history of noises I taught a few years ago. The predominant problem I encountered with my students was the struggle to search for, fine-tune, expand, or even invent a vocabulary sufficient to describe the sounds we heard and made. This problem has two aspects, which I would call ‘the birth of the sound object,’ and the need to unlearn and re-learn ‘listening.’ The latter is in fact the premise of the former.

‘Listening’ is both aesthetic and cultural. The demand of an experimental approach to sound art invites us to be critical in opening up the way we listen and what we listen to, and what is worth listening. Technology facilitates ‘enhanced listening’, stretching the scope and realm of audible things, making audible what is inaudible to our naked ears. But equally important is ‘critical listening’ – the re-definition of the value hierarchy of our audio culture and, in the process of it, counteracting dominant values that narrow down our hearing experience to pure functionality and consumption. Revisiting the idea of ‘sound objects’ by Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995) for this exhibition and the works involved, critical aesthetic intervention occurs at the very moment when the artist, through the act of listening, turns what is barely perceptible from the chaotic mass of noises into a focused object of attention, which gains shape and texture as hearing intensifies. Such is the basis of Samson Young’s work, *Signal Path II: Sinister Resonance*. Without enhanced, intensified listening, there is no sound object. Sound objects are not objective givens. Sound objects are possible only when the act of hearing occurs with performative rigor. Young’s work, necessarily site-specific, and itself reproduction of his on-location listening mediated by his documentation method, takes us back to the phenomenological core of ‘Descriptions of Hearing’, the working concept of this exhibition. Hearing is necessarily descriptive. Listening brings the potentially audible into our realm of consciousness. Description is the language activity that is always on-going, attempts to sustain our contact with what we hear via the search for the right expressions that never could be conclusive. Descriptiveness is about modes of attention. Hearing as real-time description results in new attentiveness in the
form of heightened perception and new cognition – the very purpose of art and art education.

The phenomenological nature of attending to the very process and texture of our perceptual experience leads to a second thesis of this show: our perceptual senses do not work alone. Hearing, seeing and other perceptual senses work together to form total experiences. Here I recall Gilles Deleuze’s sound-image time-image (as opposed to movement-image) to invite us to think of cinema as not just a medium accommodating different styles, but a new form of consciousness. (See his two books, Movement Image and Time Image.) Cinema is therefore a new mode of access to the infinite vastness of reality. To Deleuze, cinema is not just about the play of audio and visual signals; nor does he think one should be in the supporting role at the service of the other. The degree of autonomy of sight and sound co-existing defines his analytic classification of cinema, of how cinema works on our consciousness.

In my reading of Deleuze, the high point lies in his notion of ‘circuits’ – the fluidity of status of a sound and image situation, the mobility between levels of consciousness. As a circuit, an image or sound moves from, say, the status of a dream to memory to imagination to a here-and-now occurrence of a narrative and back and forth – in the end resisting essential naming, also collapsing any quantitative or sequential description of time. Time becomes pure duration, the sustenance of the here-and-now that defies objective measurement. The actual running time of two minutes could be experienced as if it has been many hours. Deleuze definitely favors sight and sound situations that take us into the circuits, or, in my words, facilitates multiple levels of consciousness and the mobility to travel between them.

Along the above line of thought, Chiang Chien-hsin’s Convergent Path and my own work Non-place/Other Space are both working on multiple sensorial levels. The descriptive rigor of Non-place challenges the mainstream norms of film language, opening up the descriptive force of the close-up, medium shots and full shots, and the function of montage. Not only is this work organized upon musicality for overall structure, the fragmented nature of the piece, which isolates individual shots for attentive reception, invites us to listen to and to smell what we see. Maintaining attention to the perceptual surfaces of sight and sound is a self-conscious strategy for description. Chiang’s Convergent Path invites us to immerse into a situation in which we could almost hear ‘speed’ and ‘flow’. Structured randomness and multiple windows on a single channel playing with varied tightness of shots and dimensions remove us from the comfortable position of soliciting pleasure while we may be watching, lost in time.

The inclusion of Marco De Mutis’s [Un-]Stuck is far from just a naughty pun. The clock, which is culturally associated with a specific type of sound, is both audible and mute: audible because the movement of the second’s hand conditions us to hear its click, or to imagine ourselves doing so. The artist purposefully displaces our listening to the combinatorial poetry’s unclassifiable utterances of its own measure. [Un-]Stuck is a cheerful hybrid on many counts. Its material is highly personal; its operation is programmed upon the logic of combinatorial
randomness, typical of generative literature. It is a work of writing, it yet invites
intensive seeing challenged by sounds with no found names. The work describes:
but what is it describing? Where should we place our attentiveness? Should we
hear, should we read? How do the two activities work together or against each
other? What is the significance of time? Why the clock? What if there were no
clock?

Of the few works curated in this exhibition, Hector Rodriguez’s GESTUS: JUDEX
commands the most intense and absolute attentiveness in looking. The work
begins as formal analysis based on expertise understanding of silent cinema’s
formal properties, especially the tableau shot set-up and the presence of internal
mise-en-scene (design of movement within the frame) against the absence of, or
minimum, camera movement. The artist then takes up the position of someone
working with media art almost a hundred years after the work Judex (1916,
France, Louis Feuillade) was made, and applies computational thinking to
highlight the micro narrative aspects of tableau-shot-based silent films, which
has lost our attention as the history of cinema pushes predominantly in the
direction of narrative comprehension. Whereas most computational analysis
highlights the result of the analysis, GESTUS takes us back to the process to
watch in real-time how the machine looks for matches of similar motion for each
frame. The result of the real-time process of matching not only highlights motion
as the core visual object, but also places us in a situation of immersive musicality
as the matches keep changing along the real-time playing of the entire film,
which is almost 6 hours long, comparable to a 9-strand polyphony. GESTUS-
JUDEX thus reminds us of serialism in early 20th-century music in Europe, when
musicians were in search of ways to diversify and automate composition beyond
the expressive.

Wang Yu-jun and Chen Chia-hui’s Toward the End, an object theatre with a piano,
is a total deconstruction of a familiar instrument with intensified sensuality. If I
may define a piano in common-sense terms as “a percussive musical instrument
that normally appears in a spot-lit performance,” one begins to see that all these
normative elements are actually properly preserved. The work in front of us is
still percussive, it still generates music, and it calls attention as it stands right
under the spotlight – except that this heavily prepared piano makes sound only
because the interior is laid open, the core component that generates sound is
taken out of the black-box; and anyone can ‘play’ and ‘play with’ this
disintegrated, dispersed instrument. Piano sounds, imaginable though not
audible, penetrates the theatrical space as an undoable backdrop as the play the
‘new’ sounds of the deconstructed piano – which is the piano itself no more no
less. As a visitor enters the theatrical space, s/he also enters a circuit of
consciousness – she is touching sound, hearing the material object, wandering
within the vast space between the components of the disintegrated piano.

This exhibition is an exciting experiment to me and Liao Chien-chiao, itself an
exhaustive exercise of description of synesthesia and the phenomenology of
perceptual experiences in the presence of the many forms of creative media
available to us. “Descriptions of Hearing” is the convergent point of the selected
works, each with its own artistic sources and set of concern, now brought to the
same plane, each bearing a tangential relation to the phenomenology of synesthesia.

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