Secret Noise: Marcel Duchamp and the (un)sound object

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Abstract

Marcel Duchamp's enigmatic sculpture *With Hidden Noise* (1916) is widely known, but its complex relationship to sound has received limited attention. Containing a secret object whose presence and identity is registered only by the noise it makes inside a ball of twine held between metal plates, this performative aspect of the work remains unavailable for contemporary audiences; as such, it participates in what Christof Migone qualifies as the 'unsound', the latent aural registers of silence or suppressed noise. Considering the secrecy and sonic capabilities of this object, as well as the work's collaborative contexts alongside the repeated interest in sound found elsewhere in Duchamp's activity, gives access to reading *With Hidden Noise* as a proposition about hidden or embodied knowledge, a knowledge whose complex and hybrid nature is specifically registered through the promise of a performance of sound that remains tacit but resonant.

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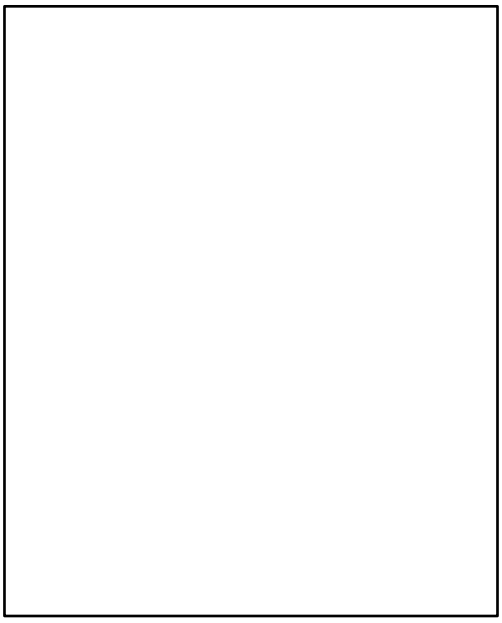

Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, *With Hidden Noise*, 1916.
Ball of twine between two brass plates, joined by four long screws, containing unknown object added by Walter Arensberg. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950-134-71. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp.

Spring 2013. I'm standing in front of Marcel Duchamp's collaborative artwork of 1916, *With Hidden Noise* (*À bruit secret*), protected in its glazed case, at the Barbican Gallery, London, and wishing not just that I could put myself closer to this puzzling apparatus, but that I could pick it up and shake it: that I could activate the secret sound within it. Between two small, nearly square metal plates bearing incomplete text phrases and held in place by four long machine screws: a ball of twine; inside the ball of twine: an unknown object, placed there at Duchamp's invitation by the work's first owner (Fig. 1). "Unrelentingly strange" in the words of one commentator (Harris 2013: 23), the work eludes my intellect in its refusal to explain itself, in those deliberately stalled

inscriptions that announce then withdraw some solution to an enigma. In a game of transatlantic tag, here it is in London when it normally lives in Philadelphia, paraphrasing Duchamp's own peripatetic journeys between Old and New Worlds – like that other burrowing object in a stringed machine, a shuttle. It is as though the Philadelphia Museum of Art, home to a collection of Duchamp's work whose provenance is in particular the legacy of Duchamp's friend and collaborator for *With Hidden Noise* Walter Arensberg, had kept hold of one end of its reel of string and will eventually wind it back, rehearsing loss and restitution, silence and exclamation, like every collector who lets go then reclaims a precious possession. *Fort ! Da !*[1]

First soundings

Marcel Duchamp discussion of *With Hidden Noise*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-z5W3W6Lro

How can we test the identity of this work, and of the thing lurking within it like a grub in an apple? How can we nudge this muted artefact from visual experience and restore the promise of its literal and figurative 'noise'? In a sound recording of *With Hidden Noise*, during a 1956 interview, Duchamp briefly explains the work and sets it rattling. It's tempting to pay attention to the ellipses, hesitations and inconsistencies in his spoken account, due perhaps

[1] I am alluding here to that emotionally loaded game of catch described just a few years later (1920) by Sigmund Freud, who on watching his grandson playing with a wooden reel attached to a length of string ("Gone! There!") read this play as his attempt to master the trauma of separation from his mother.

not simply to the fact that the object he describes is by this point a half century old but also to something deeper, something resistant in a work that – even for Duchamp – strikes us as particularly obtuse:

> This is a Readymade dating back from 1916. It's a ball of twine between two plaques of copper, bro-, brass, and when I, before I finished it Arensberg put something between inside the ball of twi- the ball of twine and never told me what it was and I didn't want to know, it was a sort of secret and it makes a noise, so we call this a Readymade With a N-Secret Noise, and listen to it [brief sound of rattling]. I never know I don't know I will never know whether it's a diamond or a coin.[2]

We notice, in particular, the triple denial of the identity of the unknown object at the heart of this work, guessed as readable at the poetic and prosaic ends of the spectrum of his friend's inherited wealth (itself derived from the transformation of raw materials into glittering capital as crucible steel): a jewel or loose change. The link Duchamp makes to status and money is more, however, than just a genial nod to Arensberg's fortune and generosity: it also pulls the object back to Duchamp's short written note (1960: unpaginated) planning a Readymade which names it as *Tirelire (ou Conserves)* – usually translated as *Piggybank (or Canned Goods)*. While the French term *tirelire*, moneybox, neatly ties up money (*lire* from the Italian), text (*lire* French for 'to read') and string (*tirer*, to pull in French), we can note as well that *conserves* has musical connotations of performing in harmony or unison (as in *conservatoire*).

[2] Sweeney 1956; *sic* throughout for all repetitions and unfinished words. The extract is better known in its transcribed version which contains several variations from this original, and tidies away the hesitations and repetitions (Sanouillet and Peterson 1975: 135).

Piggy Bank (or Canned Goods)
Make a Readymade with
a box containing something
unrecognizable by its sound and
solder the box
_____
already done in the semi Readymade
of copper plates
and a ball of twine.

With Hidden Noise sits reasonably high within the canon of Duchamp's works, dating as it does from the heyday of the early Readymades and the advent of the *Large Glass*; created in Easter 1916, it was not 'completed' until that New Year's Eve, when at Duchamp's invitation Arensberg opened it up, dropped in an object and resealed it again (Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse 1996: 163). Indeed, the presence of this brief but explicit note in *The Green Box* of 1934 locates the 1916 object as one of several Readymades whose conceptual origins lie in preparations for the *Large Glass* but that stands as a kind of unattached 'spin-off' from the larger work.[3] Frequently cited in the extensive literature on the artist, most accounts tend to focus on two of its key aspects. The first concerns issues of collaboration and secrecy: the fact that Duchamp not only handed part of the responsibility for the completion of this work to someone else, but deliberately rejected knowledge of its content.[4] The second is the enigmatic inscriptions on *With Hidden Noise*'s two brass plates, and attempts at decryption of these ruptured statements form a major part of the

[3] Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse (1996: 167) see *With Hidden Noise* as "an object broken free" from the *Large Glass*, though it's tempting to read it as always attached, however tenuously, and ready to swing back to it, by its string umbilical.

[4] See for example Duchamp's account in Cabanne (1971: 54).

scholarship on the work.[5] Though the problem of these inscriptions are not under consideration here, their interrupted meanings, the always failing attempts to reassemble a coherent message, resonate with Duchamp's stammered recollections, and set up tensions between textual and sonic languages to which we will return.

With Hidden Noise is also the subject of two idiosyncratic scholarly texts, both of which use it to access other themes and enthusiasms. The more recent of these, Seymour Howard's "Hidden Naos: Duchamp's Labyrinths" (1994) promises an analysis of the work but, after some brief readings along esoteric and mythical lines, soon moves on to expand these ideas in other directions. The other is a little-known study by Kurt von Meier from 1989-91, boasting a staggering 350,000 words. Most of it deals with contextual issues or moves around tangential but often fascinating territory, incorporating dozens of topics from time, myth and science to Tibetan Buddhism and the identity of the work's hidden object (n.d.).[6] In a sense, both texts use the work as a portal to an endless extension of ideas: *With Hidden Noise* becomes *instrumental*: picking it up and shaking it, in the mind's ear, becomes a performance attuned to the rhythms, rhymes and tones of thought.[7]

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[5] See for example Joselit (1998: 79-84). Lest we assume the inscriptions take us away from sound, we might recall that Ferdinand de Saussure defines the essence of language as an "acoustic image linked to an idea" (1993: 7a), and from this that the inscriptions might have spoken as well as written properties.

[6] Von Meier was an art historian, but he also had significant links to contemporary music, for example through friendships with bands such as the Velvet Underground and Red Crayola.

[7] A third article organized around *With Hidden Noise* draws attention to its status as an instrument: Sophie Stévance, "Marcel Duchamp's Musical Secret Boxed in the Tradition of the

If these writings see *With Hidden Noise* as the fulcrum of a cosmic order, in more succinct but productive ways two other much shorter texts also home in on the work so as to reach a broader debate. *With Hidden Noise* is the *éminence grise* at the heart of the intriguing exhibition of the same title of 2004 exploring 'ventriloquism' in contemporary sculpture – a remote sound projected onto an object. *Duchamp's* Readymade took pride of place in both the display and the catalogue, which also features a concise but fertile discussion of the work by co-curator Jon Wood emphasising the role of collaboration and distance in the work, and highlighting its play with listening and sound (2004: 28). A second consideration comes in Gavin Parkinson's *Duchamp Book* (2008: 130-31), in a brief case study essay that is again sensitive to the work's aural character, and to the fact that this interactive function is lost to contemporary audiences. It also, however, argues for its status as an enigmatic but imminent vehicle for an enquiry into epistemology, around the conditions for knowledge itself. Parkinson uses the work to help crystallise the proposal that Duchamp's entire *œuvre* might be seen as a problematisation of knowledge that can never, however, be made stable or definitive through critical interpretation. These two essays are necessarily condensed and have specific purposes in mind, but between them they open up a space that the present enquiry is also interested in occupying.

Real" (2007). Stévance is interested in the work as a music box, but is concerned primarily with locating it in relation to subsequent musical experiments and sculptural works.

Noises off

It's notable that Duchamp's own retrospective account of the work from 1956 cited above – though there are others, notably in his 1964 lecture "Apropos of Myself" and in his interviews with Pierre Cabanne (1971: 54)[8] – ignores the questions around text altogether, and foregrounds the issues of collaboration and secrecy. But clearly there is also a third constellation of questions around *With Hidden Noise* that the recording of Duchamp's story highlights, one that the scholarship only occasionally addresses. He picks the object up, and we hear him rattle it: it is a noise-making machine, an instrument – to borrow the term first devised by composer and sound theorist Pierre Schaeffer in 1959, it activates a 'sound object'. It is this possibility that I wish to explore here, one opening not just onto the issues around Duchamp, sound and music that have already been addressed by other accounts, but more particularly to the fate of the work as a missed encounter with the spectator-performer-auditor. The long silences of *With Hidden Noise*, of an object whose purpose is to be played with but whose destiny is to remain beyond our reach, join those of the performances and objects Christof Migone (2012) has termed the 'unsound': silences that are not only pregnant with hidden, latent or tacit noises, but resonate at inaudible frequencies thanks to the silences in meaning this work deliberately or accidentally embodies.

The relationships between Duchamp and music have been examined at length. We know, for example, that Duchamp frequented the French avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse throughout 1916 (Tomkins 1998: 166, 170

[8] See also the comments reproduced in D'Harnoncourt and McShine (1973: 280).

and 173). Varèse, whose research was centrally concerned with the relationships between noise and music, relocated to New York in 1915, and the two men met *chez* Arensberg. We also know that the whole period of this decade was one of repeated direct and indirect references to music, notation, composition and sound, to be found throughout Duchamp's notes (particularly in relation to the *Large Glass*) and works before and after 1916, and that he completed a number of pieces or proposals testing the limits of musical composition.[9] Carol James notes the playful and conceptual experiment in Duchamp's work around music, his testing of the boundaries between sound and other media, and his particular interest in a kind of synesthetic musical experience and the problems of listening – for example, in his propositions for sound's ability to manipulate the listener's orientation in space, and for convergent tones as 'musical sculpture' in "an immense Venus de Milo made with sounds around the listener" (1990: 114).[10] Only one study, however, situates these questions explicitly in terms of sound and noise rather than of music. Craig Adcock's 'Marcel Duchamp's Gap Music: Operations in the Space Between Art and Noise' focuses on the hollows, ruptures or absences found in Duchamp's investigation of the aural field, arguing that Duchamp's strategy uses sound to express "in-betweenness, this hypothetical gap between the real and the fictitious, the objective and the subjective" (1992: 130).

[9] See for example Bryars 1976, James 1990 (both of which refer briefly to *With Hidden Noise*) or Stévance 2009.

[10] This is a useful place to situate Duchamp as a *listener*, a theme to which several of his notes refer. Alert to the 'infra-slim' of noise (like the sound of corduroy trousers), David Toop (2010: 68-70) notes Duchamp's great sensitivity to sounds, and observes that his mother Lucie suffered from hearing problems that by Duchamp's birth had made her almost deaf.

Whatever the reference points of *With Hidden Noise*, its specific status as a *sculpture* seems in some doubt, and its place on a continuum between the conceptual and the aural seems as plausible as regarding it as a straightforwardly 'artistic' proposition. Perhaps, amongst other avatars of this enigmatic work, Duchamp was thinking of something like Mallarmé's celebrated "aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore" (from the sonnet of 1868 *Ses purs ongles très haut*): an object that both is and is not a text, evoked and withdrawn through absence in the form of tautological expression, this 'trinket' made of an inane or worthless sound.[11] For Mallarmé, reading a poem out loud activates a triangulation between object, sound and representation, one that signals at the same time an identity and an absence since, as Elizabeth McCombie argues following Julie Kristeva, the sound of a word considered in its own right severs the conventional relationship between sign and object; what is born instead, for Mallarmé, is a "true representation of the object … achieved when the 'son' (sound) is reflected in and of itself" (2003: 27-28).

This focus on a pure sound in its own right, one that achieves a new and more penetrating relationship to the object, is one that might be seen at work in *With Hidden Noise*, even if the activation of this sound is denied to its audiences today. The discipline of listening, of sound considered in and of itself, is also the focus of French composer and music/sound theorist Pierre Schaeffer's exhaustive *Traité des objets musicaux*, first published in 1966 but drawn from

[11] Mallarmé's sonnet already problematizes the questions of presence and absence in the context of sound, musical or otherwise; see for example Sugano (1992: 20-31). Mallarmé was one of the few literary figures whose work Duchamp valued.

his theoretical and practical development of *musique concrète* from the 1940s onwards. The *Treatise on Musical Objects* places centre stage his identification of the 'sound object', one that refocuses the idea of music and sound towards strategies of hearing (Schaeffer 2017; Chion 2009). The sound object, it should be clarified, is not a material entity; nor is it to be confused with the physical thing whose agitation may have caused the sound: it is sound itself, considered as an object (of composition, of investigation, of knowledge). Indeed, for Schaeffer the pure *objet sonore* is one whose origin you don't know, accessed through the kind of perception known as 'acousmatic listening' (as happens when sound is recorded and mechanically or electronically reproduced), where the listener hears a noise without observing its source.

We might think of *With Hidden Noise*, then, as an activation of a sound object: the armature of twine and brass plates is an apparatus containing a sound of unknown origin; repeatedly unknown, since its source is invisible, its material identity unverifiable, and for today's audience it must remain virtual or latent, an 'unsound' that vibrates beyond conventional perception. As a device, *With Hidden Noise* requires an acousmatic listening; even if this is not through the activation of a recording, as in Schaeffer's sound objects, it nevertheless gravitates towards technologies of mechanisation and reproduction: machine-made twine, engineered brass, and inside, a rattling body from the pocket of a man of industrial means.[12] What might this perspective open onto?

[12] Duchamp would at least on one occasion draw upon the technology of recorded sound, in his 1935 *Rotoreliefs* activating circular optical designs by spinning them on a record turntable. Several *Rotorelief* designs specifically evoke the grooves of a record, as if to anticipate

Methodical, seeking objects ‘made to serve’ rather than cloaked in mystery or narrative, Schaeffer is not interested in chance, the arbitrary or the humour with which Duchamp’s object experiments are often charged; indeed, in a final chapter added to the 1977 edition of the *Treatise*, he specifies: “Present-day musical expression may well still be at the stage of laboriously cultivating old surrealist challenges amid instrumental disarray, and the fascination for the readymade and the happening, but I have said often enough that this was not my ambition. Duchamp was never my mentor” (2017: 535). His task, on the contrary, is to discover cross-disciplinary principles and structures, to dig deep into an ontology of sound in order ‘to recover its general laws’, to locate spaces where the vectors of scientific and creative research converge. Indeed, particularly where he interrogates the relationships between sound and language – citing “an unbroken chain” that runs “from objects to structures and from structures to language” (15) – considers sound *as* a language, and situates the sound object as “entirely contained within our perceptual consciousness” (67) so as to reappraise frameworks of perception, Schaeffer’s deeper intention is to propose sound as an access to knowing, as epistemology and ontology: “the concept of the sound object, apparently so simple, quite soon obliges us to refer to the theory of knowledge, and the relationships between man and the world” (206). This goal, as we have noted, is not very far from some of the claims made for Duchamp’s works, in which concept, object and the converging arcs of distinct modes of thought come together in a mode of speculative philosophy, through an encounter between

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Schaeffer’s early technique of ‘closed grooves’ on records to produce sound loops; they also, intriguingly, hint at diagrams of wound twine.

making, observing and material. Listened to via Schaeffer, *With Hidden Noise* could be seen to embody these conceptual ambitions: as with several of Duchamp's works its misaligned inscriptions point to questions of language and meaning, but now the specific problem of sound lies at its heart. For Schaeffer, the sound object has something unique among objects:

> All other objects of consciousness speak to him [man] about other things than consciousness: in the language of men they describe the world to him in accordance with the ideas he forms of it. Sound objects and musical structures, when they are authentic, have no informative mission: they turn away from the descriptive world with a sort of reticence in order to speak all the better about it to the senses, the heart and mind, to the whole being, ultimately about himself. […] They are man, described to man, in the language of things. (529)

This might be overstretching the claims for *With Hidden Noise*, but as we will soon explore in greater detail, questions of knowledge and exchange are intrinsic components of its mechanisms.

Performance, acoustics, optics

Sound artist and theorist Brandon LaBelle sees two key currents shaping the landscape of twentieth century sound art: one stemming from the studio experiments of Schaeffer, the other from the performances and compositions of John Cage. Where the former conceives of sound as an object, the latter is alert to the resonances of physical things; if in the first the emphasis is on technical expertise, physics and acoustics, minimising contexts, in the second, it is the performativity of materials and audiences, prioritising contexts, that take centre stage (LaBelle 2006: 24-25 and 32-33). Given Duchamp's friendship and interactions with Cage, much of the scholarship on the artist's

thinking about sound has been correlated with Cage's materialist and socially-attuned perspectives;[13] these should be turned to for access to the next layers of *With Hidden Noise*.

If *With Hidden Noise* is a device harbouring a sound object, this noise nevertheless requires activation. In this light, its acoustic potentials signal that the work might be considered as much *performative* as it is visual, conceptual or contemplative, at least by participants around and after its genesis on New Year's Eve 1916 *chez* Arensberg. According to Duchamp's often-cited statement of 1957 'The Creative Act', any artwork is in fact just one corner of a triangulation between artist, artwork and spectator. But if this spectator effectively completes the work through his or her interpretative contribution, here this audience member might in principle also become both listener and activator: a participant musician (Duchamp seems to have already accounted for this in claiming that "the creative act is not *performed* by the artist alone" (Duchamp 1975: 140, my emphasis)). Without this intervention, indeed, this is one work that never quite manages to re-stage its completedness for successive generations of observers, since originally the activation of *With Hidden Noise* relied on its location not in a gallery but in a private collection and a domestic space.

As a sound-generating object or machine, *With Hidden Noise* is in this sense less a sculpture than an invitation, an *instrument*. Robert Lebel, for example, in a comparison that rubs a little awkwardly against Duchamp's customary

[13] See in particular Basualdo and Battle 2013; *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp* 2005.

preoccupations but that the two friends might well have discussed in conversation, reads the work as “a typical magical noise-maker like the churinga or bull-roarer of the Australian aborigine” (1959: 39). We certainly know that around late 1915 and early 1916 Duchamp was thinking of relationships between object, space and sound – of an object as one step away from an instrument – in the context of the work immediately preceding *With Hidden Noise*, *Comb* of 1916, which a note from the *Green Box* links to the idea of a rattle. Asked by Arturo Schwarz to elucidate this insight – after all, a metal comb doesn't normally rattle, though presumably its teeth might be ‘zipped’ with a finger, or it might be played using the traditional method of wrapping it in paper and humming through it – Duchamp replied “Well, the Rattle is a toy for children that makes noise when you turn it, and the comb becomes a generator of space, space generated by teeth.”[14] At a primitive level, *With Hidden Noise* can certainly be considered as a makeshift rattle, one that, of course, combines a traditional musician’s activations with acousmatic listening since a rattle’s noise source is usually hidden.

[14] In Schwarz (1969: 461). Duchamp’s reply makes clear that the rattle he has in mind is the rotating mechanism that strikes a flexible plate against teeth (also known as a ratchet), not the sort containing objects in a resonating chamber like *With Hidden Noise*. In French the two are quite distinct: *crécelle* and *hochet* respectively.

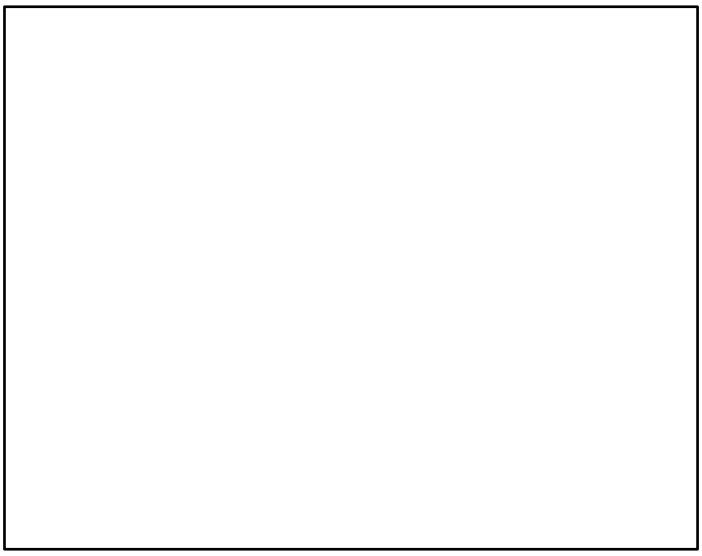


Fig. 2. Marcel Duchamp, *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-4, replica 1964. Wood, glass and paint on canvas. Tate gallery. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2020.

It's tempting along these lines to re-think Duchamp's repeated use of string and wire as speculative experiments with plucked or percussive instruments, as sound-making objects that might resonate aurally as well as intellectually: the chirruping spokes of *Bicycle Wheel*;[15] the stringed and wired mechanisms of the *Large Glass* and its related studies; and the *pianissimo* cacophony of the huge acoustic instrument to be plucked by the visitor that is the 'mile of string' – Duchamp's irreverent winding of twine around and against the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* of 1942, and in which audience members become the musicians of a space turned into a music box. In particular, this invites us to read the playful mathematics of *Three Standard Stoppages* of 1913 (Fig. 2), in which the chance-derived configurations of three identical one-metre lengths of string are used to destabilise the logic of measurement and geometry, as the beginnings of an investigation into the pitch and timbre

[15] Adcock notes *Bicycles Wheel*'s potential as a latent musical instrument, and its sound when spun (1992: 108).

of a stringed instrument, just as the strings of a violin or guitar are all the same length but produce different notes when ‘stopped’ against a fingerboard. The resultant curves, made into wooden templates, in turn resemble diagrams of sinusoidal sound waves and their complex harmonics. While this suggests ways in which we might read the work as performative and aural, on at least one occasion Duchamp presented it not only in the context of sound, but linked this idea of noise to the notion of meaning and delayed or deferred knowledge – in other words, to the resonances of the unsound. In a late interview with Katherine Kuh, Duchamp offered this perspective on *Three Standard Stoppages*:

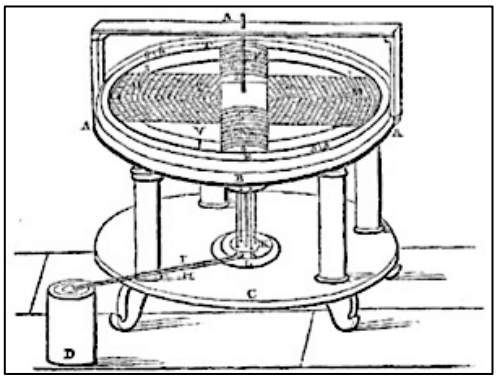
> In itself it was not an important work of art, but for me it opened the way – the way to escape from those traditional methods of expression long associated with art. I didn't realize at that time exactly what I had stumbled on. When you tap something, you don't always recognize the sound. That's apt to come later. For me the Three Stoppages was a first gesture liberating me from the past (in Judovitz 1998: 35).

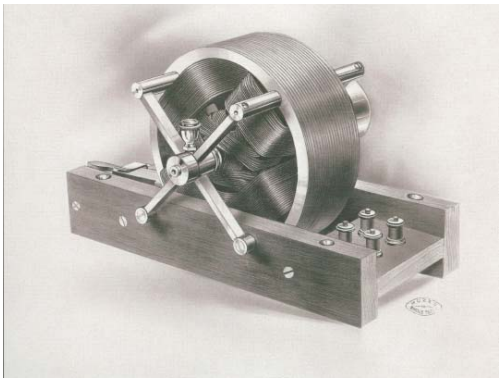
Questions of sound, then, are connected to matters of time, and the ‘sonic turn’ of Duchamp’s work might be seen in the light of his concern with temporality and duration. This is close to what Schaeffer specifies when he compares visual (material) objects and aural objects: “sound objects, unlike visual objects, exist in duration, not in space: their physical medium is essentially an energetic event occurring in time” (2017*:* 190). In this sense, Duchamp’s attention to duration and ‘delay’ (a word that in recording studio parlance is also the technical term for an audio echo) is part of his strategy for weakening the reign of the visual over the phenomenology of space.

Casey O'Callaghan, a philosopher interested in perception, has set out the distinctions between vision and audition with the problem of the conception of 'auditory objects' in mind. He emphasises their disembodied condition, in that "auditory experience presents sounds as independent from ordinary material things, in a way that visual and tactual features are not" (2008: 804), something emphasised in *With Hidden Noise* since the source of the sound is doubly hidden – from view and from memory. More particularly, the distinction between visual and auditory objects, O'Callaghan argues, is that while auditory forms lack the spatial boundaries and the material opacity of visual objects, what they possess instead is the quality of unfolding, of occurrence: sounds "furnish information about the *events* and *happenings* – the collisions, vibrations and interactions – that commonly make or produce sounds. [They] do not concern the relatively static material objects that exist at a time; they engage the ongoing activities and transactions in which such objects engage" (2008: 824). This temporal quality seems activated and targeted by several aspects of *With Hidden Noise*: the moment of its secret completion by Arensberg; the friends' performances that would have ensued; and its latent re-activation by every contemporary viewer posing as a listener.

Exchanges between the visual and the aural are found everywhere in Duchamp's work; Adcock for one (1992: 130) makes the claim that his initiation of such a dialogue specifically harnesses sound in order to critique visual conventions. This conversation might go both ways. It's tempting to see Duchamp's interest in optics – present notably in the *Large Glass* and studies but also in the later experiments of the *Rotoreliefs*, harnessed to the rotating

mechanism of the phonograph, and the doubtless noiseful optical machines of the 1920s, all of these being also investigations into multi-dimensionality – as a ‘referred’ interest in acoustics, like a referred pain caused in one place but experienced in another. To use a term that has several times been applied to Duchamp’s conceptual strategies, the optical and the acoustic are ‘in resonance’ with each other, with ideas and forms from one domain echoed and triggered in the other to fertile but often subtle effect. An acoustic resonance, as with the hollow body of a violin or guitar, requires space, an interval that is also at one level the chamber in which the wider questions about the status of art practice can be rehearsed. As Duchamp noted in conversation with Schwarz, “It’s not what you see that is art, art is the gap” (in Judovitz 1998: 35). Once again, the artwork’s presence is figured both as an absence (a silence, or a hidden signal) and as the space between art and nonart that makes resonance possible.





Figs 3 and 4. Thomas Davenport's patented electric motor, 1837. Image courtesy of Karlsruhe Institute of Technology; Nikola Tesla, electric induction motor, 1888. Source: public domain via www.cleanpng.com.

In this spirit of resonance we might pause to note the existence of several cousins to Duchamp’s string instruments lying latent within his practice, though I

am not trying to suggest that the artist had them specifically in mind. The first, with reference back to *With Hidden Noise*'s status as a coiled contraption, is the more general link between this work and its associations with stringed mechanisms – objects that usually make a conspicuous amount of noise. These might include looms and the machinery of the production of cordage (an industry in which he was later to take more of an interest),[16] but also electric motors and transformers featuring a central armature wound with wire (Figs 3 and 4). Duchamp already makes an explicit link between coils and motion in his *Chocolate Grinder*, whose grinding stones are strung with lead wire in place of the grooves they would normally have. Wire coils are also, however, at the heart of several sonic devices developed in the same era as *With Hidden Noise*, such as moving coil microphones and hearing aids. The next is the 'tin can telephone', a primitive communication device first tested experimentally by Robert Hooke in the 1660s, and known to children around the world: two resonating containers are joined by a piece of string which, when kept taut, can transmit sound from one to the other (Fig 5). Known in the nineteenth century as the 'lovers' phone', the suggestion of acoustic communication where sound (or unsound) equates with meaning along string or wire finds echoes in the *Large Glass*, in which the tentative lines connecting male and female zones (the filament-like 'toboggan' and 'handler of gravity' that might after all have opened the line of communication between bride and bachelors) figure those elements that Duchamp forbore to complete.

[16] Duchamp specified that in 1942 'I had a friend, even almost a relative, in Boston who is an accountant in a cordage place for Boston Harbour', who supplied him with the string for *First Papers of Surrealism* (Demos 2001: 109).

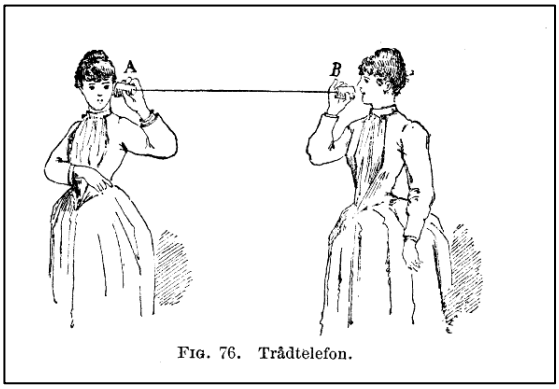
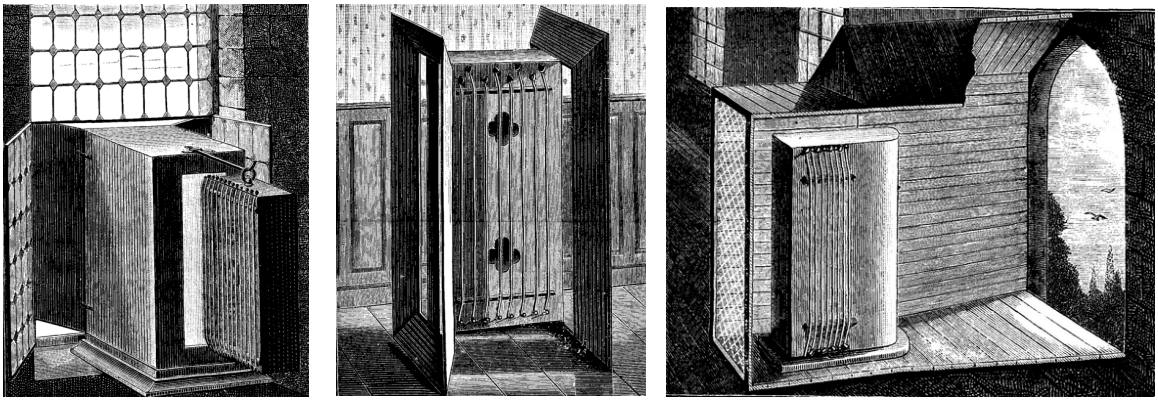


Fig 5. Lovers' telephone, illustration from Swedish translation of Ebenezer Cobham Brewer and François-Napoléon-Marie Moigno, *Hvarför? och Huru? Nyckel till naturvetenskaperna*, 1890. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The third is that enigmatic, satisfyingly Rousselian machine, the aeolian harp. An instrument without a musician, the harp is made from a resonating box set so as to be played by the wind. Known in ancient world, the instrument was first described by Athanasius Kircher in his *Phonurgia nova* (1673), in which we note that the author also makes analogies between sound and light, since this treatise argues that the laws of acoustics can be derived from those of optics.[17] Usually placed on a tree or building, in particular the Aeolian harp is also to be set by an open window, and period images of such harps – for example, of Kircher's seventeenth century harp or the instrument installed at Baden Baden castle reproduced in a *Scientific American Supplement* of 1885-6 (Figs 6-8) – shows the machine in direct configuration with an open window, in phase with the *Large*

[17] See Godwin 1979: 67. A prodigious thinker, Kircher published on subjects such as optics, perspective, and anamorphosis, all topics likely to interest Duchamp, but also on music, acoustics and musical mechanisms. This included techniques of projecting sound, for example to create 'talking sculptures' that strike a chord with Duchamp's own sound sculpture proposal (Claudia Maina makes a link between Kircher and *With Hidden Noise*, 2010: 79). According to Jean Clair (2000), Duchamp's readings at the bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève included Kircher's work.

Glass's status as both window and door.[18] While there is no suggestion that Duchamp had this instrument in view, several reverberations are noteworthy: between the rectangular wooden case of the harp and that used to house the unsound strings of *Three Standard Stoppages*; the repeated use of 'resonating boxes' that characterise his archiving and curation of his own practice; the wafting *Draft Pistons* of 1914 or the geometry book strung up and left to flutter in the wind that was *Unhappy Readymade* of 1919, along with its parent *Sculpture de Voyage* of the previous year, in which rubber strips were stretched across the artist's New York studio.[19]



Figs 6-8. Kircher's Aeolian harp; Frost and Kastner's improved Aeolian harp; Aeolian harp in the old castle of Baden Baden. *Scientific American* supplement No. 483, April 1885. Source: Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org.

[18] Robert Lebel (1959: 96) makes a passing link between the *Large Glass* and the Aeolian harp. The *Scientific American* article is republished at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14097/14097-h/14097-h.htm#29 (accessed 25.6.18). I cannot resist reporting that readers scrolling down this web page will find that the next article is entitled "Physics Without Apparatus. Manufacture Of Illuminating Gas"…

[19] See Spieker (2008: 57), who connects Duchamp's use of string and his interest in time, noting that Duchamp specifically understood *Unhappy Readymade* as being at the mercy of the wind.

Secret noises

Let's return to the actual sounds and movements the concealed object inside *With Hidden Noise* makes, in the small dark space inside the work: a sparky ricochet against metal plates, syncopated with the unsound as it bumps the felted hollow of the column of twine. Whatever is inside has been resilient enough to withstand the commotion: solid and hard, it revels in its agitation. The circle of friends gathered around Arensberg in 1916 was noted for its energetic partying: costume balls, bohemian entertainments, all-night jazz . . .[20] It was, after all, alongside this atmosphere that *With Hidden Noise* was 'completed' that New Year's Eve and perhaps, we may wonder, on that first night paraded around between dancers listening to music, passed from hand to hand, jiggled like a cocktail shaker or maraca among laughter and happy rumpus: crossing between the two meanings of 'play' in an environment where noise (*pace* Jacques Attali) might for a moment signal nothing but the performance of pleasure.

If we think of *With Hidden Noise* as an instrument, or imagine Duchamp's satisfaction at his now completed piece endlessly rehearsing the first sound of Arensberg dropping the object in its chamber, then we must also admit that as a sound object the work seems now consigned to the realm of speculation: in a vitrine, nothing can awaken an aeolian harp or an 'unhappy' readymade. Does this mean that *With Hidden Noise* has been definitively silenced? Rather, we might propose, it has joined the ranks of Migone's unsound objects: those sounds that relate precisely to that which is still active, present and concrete in

[20] Accounts of the tremendous partying around the Arensberg salon, at its heyday around 1916, are recapped by Jones (2004: 203-4).

the many kinds of silence: the realm of *potential* sound, or of 'a sound where there is none, a sound despite itself, a sonic state of silence' (2012: 78 and 238). Migone's interest centres on the diverse practices of a sound art that is less art form than art *informe*; and one that might gravitate around the key notion of play: "As a marker of resistance and opposition to the Law, play is audible, but not necessarily with the ears. Sound art [that privileges play] indicates a flight into thinking which should not be taken as a retraction into the safe confines of the cogito". The realm of the unsound is intended not so much to be heard as *thought*, a shift from listening with the ear to listening with the mind (2012: 4 and 14-15). The apparent betrayal of Duchamp's intention for *With Hidden Noise* – to activate the performative and the aural against the tyranny of the visual – turns out to have returned it after all to the world of intellectual reflection. More than this, as Migone points out in relation to that master of silence, Duchamp's friend John Cage, the unsound lies in wait for all sound, for all meanings: "Cage taught us that silence is chimerical. Its purity is conceptual, it is an impossibility. As such, silence haunts all creative acts, its negation provides the constitutive ground for these acts" (2012: 18).

So *With Hidden Noise* is not so much silenced as at rest: *tacet*, tacit; an instrument played by the brain as much as the hand. Flitting between the visible, the audible and the conceivable, the work's text is visible but unspeakable, while its secret object, at first audible but unnameable, rattles its enigma in the chambers of our head. In an extended note of 1914 devoted to dictionaries and atlases, Duchamp floated the idea of a kind of shorthand language that would translate between French and other languages, to be written out on card index

system, but he also asks: ‘Sound of this language, is it speakable? No’ (Sanouillet and Peterson 1975: 77). This proposal for a language of the in-between, in the space of resonance, is a silent or interrupted one: a cutting out of sound that we also find precisely in the inscriptions on *With Hidden Noise*, with their ellipses and aporia of an ‘unspeakable’ language curtailed by elided letters, and that returns in Duchamp’s stumblings as he tried to ‘speak’ *With Hidden Noise* in the interview of 1956.

Was this possibility of sound always already silent, or has it been *silenced*? Part of this story lies in the small but significant shift opened up by the work’s title in two different languages: *With Hidden Noise* in English (the work being made in New York), *À bruit secret* in French.[21] As happens more than once with Duchamp’s word-play or bilingual titles, and as an echo of the stereoscopic photography experiments and shifts between 2-, 3- and 4-dimensionality that fascinated the artist, it is with such tiny and apparently insignificant changes in orientation, observing something from two adjacent but distinct positions so as to produce a bifocal understanding, that an object begins to gain depth. ‘Hidden’ noise / ‘secret’ noise: where in the first iteration an active process has concealed sound, has located it and then removed it from normal perception (yet anticipating the possibility of its disclosure), in the second the sound itself gains agency: a covert, never to be revealed actor announced as absent from cognition as well as perception, one whose very naming threatens to violate a taboo.

[21] Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse read this French title as itself a play on words: *abri secret*, or ‘secret shelter’ (1996: 163). In the 1956 interview Duchamp conflates the two titles in his statement. One might note that Old French also has the now archaic word *noise*, meaning a more general ‘trouble’, discord or uproar, and linked to terms such as ‘nausea’ and ‘nautical’; see Michel Serres, ‘Genesis’, and Yasunao Tone, ‘Parasite / Noise’, in Kelly 2011: 93 and 101.

What kind of noise might be secret? One that is suppressed or unwanted, maybe – just as Migone emphasises the unruly sonic eloquence of the body, of the 'plumbing' that is another of Duchamp's domains: the gurgles and aural secretions. One perhaps that is inaudible to normal hearing: that comes out as a different kind of vibration. This would be the place to re-emphasise that in both languages, *With Hidden Noise*'s title specifies not music, not sound, but the (generally pejorative) term *noise*. Noise is usually seen as a kind of unwanted excess of agitation or meaning: it is disruptive, disorderly, polluting or insistent. Noise is mis-directed or out of kilter: it is, to borrow a formula from Mary Douglas, 'sound out of place'. A term already loaded with avant-garde credentials for its machinic-aggressive potential (as in Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noises* manifesto of 1913), noise is anomalous and mobile, as Migone points out, "a leakage occurring at various levels" (2012: 5). This begins to give a sense of how noise might also be figured as a conceptual incursion with potentially political force: as Attali writes, it is "a transgressive agent engaged with the power grid" (1985: 6). It emerges where there is power: "A noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission. […] Noise, then, does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed" (1985: 26). For Attali, noise attacks existing structures as "the source of […] mutations in the structuring codes", it reorganises meaning:

> first, because the interruption of a message signifies the interdiction of the transmitted meaning, signifies censorship and rarity; and second, because the very absence of meaning […] frees the listener's imagination. The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings, absolute ambiguity, a construction outside meaning. The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization, of a new code in another network. (1985: 33)

If this isn't quite the register of the hand-held conviviality of *With Hidden Noise*, converging concerns can be registered all the same: the activism of resonance, the occupation of structures, the gaps between meaning and its others; a communication, but also its scrambling and jamming that is more fertile than expected. In an echo (delay) of Duchamp, of Schaeffer, Attali offers: “With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. […] In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men” (1985: 6). These disordered relations are at one level Duchamp’s slippages between registers and paradigms, making his work a machine for an experiment with meaning. In *With Hidden Noise*, of course, it isn’t so much the noise that is secret – to pick it up is immediately to perceive it. What’s hidden, then, despite the work’s title, is the object making the noise, a slippage from sound to object that Douglas Kahn sees as inherent in language’s tendency to privilege the visual and conflate (audible) sound and (visible) object (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 4).

This small but significant bipolar instability, flickering like a 3-D novelty postcard, seems to mimic the whole work’s sense of undecidability. Labelled in plain sight by phrases containing gaps where complete words are expected, playing with its participants’ expectations, revealing and withdrawing in the same gesture, *With Hidden Noise* puts sound where a solution to a puzzle should have been. What might the intricate equation be between sound, performance, absence and meaning? A note discussing the shortcomings of avant-garde writers by Arensberg, drawn from conversations with Duchamp around February 1916, a few months before *With Hidden Noise* was begun, observed that

> Marcel dislikes the element of taste […] in the writings of all these folk – also in the work of Picasso. They *weigh* the words – + choose accordingly – weigh for sound, also for sense – to get a sort of balance. (Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse 1996: 156)

For Duchamp, then, a kind of equivalence might have suggested itself between language, sound and sense, where the rattle of noise as the object is picked up and tested in the hand might either substitute itself for meaning, or provide an echo signalling the moment meaning is withdrawn, just as Duchamp's word-game works from late 1915 and 1916 specifically employ a strategy of rejecting or deleting a word every time it might start to mean something, every time taste threatens the sovereignty of indifference. *With Hidden Noise*'s interrupted inscriptions invite its player to rattle the object whenever a word stalls so as to banish taste and judgment, to fill in (or defy) the blanks with a 'secret' sound that both stands in for signification and testifies the futility of seeking one out.

One might from here read the work as a critique and polarity switch of what has traditionally been seen as art's job: to channel emotion and experience into the visual. Is the artwork always in fact so obliging? In terms that resonate with *With Hidden Noise*'s absences and substitutions, Darian Leader considers the sense of the failure of the image's visualisation, of the way in which desire's gaze always misses its aim and forces a need to shift representation to another register, for instance where "The impossibility of giving an image to the desiring look translates into sound" (Leader is discussing the representation of the scream in the paintings of Francis Bacon):

> What the psychoanalytic approach [to the work of Bacon and other painters] suggests is that visual reality is based on an exclusion that is less the result of a prohibition than an impossibility. The world can retain a

> consistency for us not because society says that certain things need to be covered up or taboo, but because they actually cannot pass to the level of visualisation or even ready imagination. […] And if the look is profoundly disparate from the field of the image, it has to be represented in another register – such as sound (2002: 154).

Secrecy and complicity: *sub rrosa*

"Secrecy," writes Mary Nooter, "is a channel of communication and commentary; a social and political boundary marker, and a medium of property and power"; it operates around social performances in which "strategies of concealment" are as important as the promise of revelation (1993: 20 and 24). Unexpectedly, then, secrets are often less about invisibility or withholding than cohesion, structure and relation, as Georg Simmel already suggested in 1906.[22] Secrecy is the name we can give to knowledge and meaning that is shared but controlled, tacit (anthropologists have noted that secrets are often 'known' to many but revealed, acknowledged and 'understood' only by initiates). What secrecy motivates, then, is a kind of unsound performative community, one characterised both by collaboration and the spaces or silences between it. As it happens, of course, *With Hidden Noise* bears just these hallmarks of complicities and silences, of conversations whose breaths of fresh air are lost to us. Created in the convivial atmosphere of the New York intellectual circle into which Duchamp was initiated from the minute he arrived in New York – his first visit to Walter and Louise Arensberg's apartment was made the day he stepped off the boat in June 1915 (Cabanne, 1971: 51) – it looks to be as much the outcome of shared conversations and enthusiasms as a product for which Duchamp could claim sole

[22] On secrecy as a reciprocal relation, see Simmel 1906. For a discussion of these themes in ethnographic contexts, see T.O. Beidelman, "Secrecy and Society: The Paradox of Knowing and the Knowing of Paradox", in Nooter 1993: 41-47.

authority. As we have noted, it is overseen most famously – 'completed', though this finality is delicate: "when I, before I finished it" – by Walter's gesture of hiding an object within it, even if his contribution seems never to have been enough for historians or institutions to credit him with authorship rather than mere ownership.

Arensberg's wider collaboration with Duchamp is in several ways constituted under the sign of secrecy and pregnant silence. Arensberg's interests and his relationship with Duchamp are well-documented; in particular he would influence (or confirm) Duchamp's growing interest in cryptography, semantic play and enigma around this time.[23] One might notice, for example, that the theme of mystery, arcana and overlain identities is particularly marked in Arensberg's future writings, for example three publications claiming to reveal the presence of Francis Bacon behind the works of William Shakespeare by unveiling forms of word play. Significantly, this line of enquiry was based for Arensberg upon the certainty that behind one author's identity, encoded in the very letter of his texts, lies another to be discerned peeking between the lines only with the help of stealthy detection. All of this dovetails tellingly into the ideas of secrecy, masking and persona present in Duchamp's work and thought (whose assumed alter-egos like Rrose Sélavy began to emerge in the next decade), and echoes in turn the links between controlled or encrypted knowledge and the performance of persona described by anthropologists, for example, as being a key component of strategies of secrecy.[24] In fact another, even more occluded level of collaboration for *With Hidden Noise* is uncovered by Molly Nesbit and Naomi Sawelson-Gorse

[23] See Naumann, 1990: on the close relationship between the two men, see for example 303; for Arensberg's interest in cryptography, see 222.

[24] See for example Nooter 1993: 33 on secrecy, initiation and masking.

(1996: 163-67), who identify the journalist and playwright Sophie Treadwell – a regular in the Arensberg circle – as joint author of a key segment of the work's logic, the bilingual word games of its inscriptions. While this time Duchamp took steps to signal Treadwell's contribution, signing the work "Sophie Marcel / Easter 1916 - December 31, 1916" – a move that pointedly excludes Walter from sharing this billing – one notes that Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse remain the only commentators to insist upon Treadwell's role. It seems that some silences are particularly hard to break.

Interleaved with these layers of unsound and tacitly acknowledged collaborations sit other problematizing factors that complicate the story further still, and which again most observers have not been inclined to worry about since they disturb the object's narrative coherence. There's the intriguing fact, in particular, that *With Hidden Noise* was apparently one of *three* works, all presumably made at the same time, triplets with different and at present unaccounted destinies.[25] While Arensberg's object is the one we think we know, it would seem that Duchamp made a second for Treadwell and a third for himself, so ensuring that all three partners in the work might have equal ownership of it (Nesbit and Sawelson-Gorse: 1993: 163 and 167). The others of the trio seem to have vanished without trace (though the possibility of their eventual reappearance is tantalising, and it seems particularly odd that Duchamp would have let slip his

[25] Duchamp's account of the work to Pierre Cabanne (1971: 54) makes this clear, though he gets the date wrong: "I did three readymades – it was Easter 1926 – and I have lost them. One of them stayed with Arensberg, who put something inside, after loosening the plates." 11 further authorised editioned versions of the work would be made in 1963 and 1964, making 14 in all.

own copy).[26] We might assume, though without any evidence to support this, that all three bore the same inscriptions, but crucially there is nothing to suggest that the second and third versions contained hidden objects.[27] The story of Arensberg 'finishing' *With Hidden Noise* – so completing the work by giving it a name as much as a content, since Duchamp later specified that it was not initially titled[28] – thus leaves its two siblings in limbo, perhaps without a name (since no hidden object means no secret noise) and either awaiting completion, definitively incomplete like the *Large Glass*, or else secretly complete…

Secrecy has a particular status for Duchamp's œuvre and biography: hidden relationships, furtive processes and ideas, alternate identities all seem hooked to a power that the artist both organises and disdains at the same time.[29] The combination of coded or withheld inscriptions, plus the strategies of hiding its object – of hiding its noise, according to its title, its 'sound object' – and the performances of guessing its identity, make *With Hidden Noise* a convenient marker for the 'special knowledge' that is often seen as both art's seductive appeal and its often apparently forbidding levels of difficulty and occult status. This is a frequent problem with Duchamp's work, making interpretations prone to speculation or conspiracy theories. In cultural terms, the idea of secrecy is aligned with dangerous or prohibited knowledge, and thence more broadly to otherness, strangeness and the sense of alternate realms; it signals

[26] Rhonda Roland Shearer (2000: 3) notes that Duchamp's photograph *Ombres portées*, dated 1918, showing shadows of Readymades cast on the studio wall, seems to include not one but two *With Hidden Noises*.

[27] Schwarz (1969: 462) states that only Arensberg's version held an object.

[28] 'The name came after': Cabanne 1971: 54.

[29] For a discussion of secrecy in the work of Duchamp, see Parkinson (2008: 124-7).

misalignments between accepted structures and a 'hidden' truth (Beidelman 1993: 42-44). To conceive of a secret implies that at least one person knows its truth; in fact, over the course of its history several individuals have been members of *With Hidden Noise*'s secret society: while Arensberg died in 1954, Duchamp passed on the knowledge of the hidden object's identity to the curator and critic Walter Hopps in 1963, who in turn passed it on before his death to curator and Duchamp specialist Anne d'Harnoncourt (Von Meier n.d.; Parkinson 2008: 130). Whether others, in the wake of d'Harnoncourt's own death in 2008, might know the object's identity is open to question.[30] In the late 1960s, Kurt von Meier came right out and asked Hopps what the object was, to which Hopps replied: "If you really want to know, I suppose I could tell you. But that might just spoil the game for you. Or, at least, there's a much better game if you try to figure it out" (n.d.: chapter 1 section 2).

Secrecy and collaboration are both forms of communication incorporating objects and organising or constructing knowledge; they prioritise negotiation, coding and decoding, dancing around points of non-knowledge, or where meaning slips and must be re-aligned. As we have already seen, Schaeffer makes a specific knowledge claim for the sound object, as a communication through things; three centuries earlier, quoting Hermes Trismegistus, Athanasius Kircher had made the same point: 'Music is nothing else but knowing the ordering of all things' (Godwin 1979: 66). *With Hidden Noise*, too, is a kind of communication through an object

[30] Personal email communications with former Philadelphia Museum of Art Curator of Modern Art Michael Taylor (February 15 and 16, 2018) confirmed that its policy had been to maintain the secrecy of the object. Wood (2004: 28) suggests that the Museum has subsequently x-rayed the work and knows the object's identity.

and sound object whose use of secrecy and complicity aims at the boundaries between knowledge and non-knowledge, negotiated through sound.

Lost signal

In the end, and despite the distracting game of its written inscriptions, *With Hidden Noise* is a remarkably concise statement of internal energies and forces held in mutual balance, organizing its binaries like a battery: the hard and the flexible, the organic or recently natural (fibre) versus inorganic and technological (metal and screws), constriction against agitation, flat surface (plates) against oblate mass (twine)… In this sense, it is less a work than a practical device for activating relationships between the scopic, the haptic and the auditory; a mechanism whose shortcoming is that only the first of these can now be operated. But this is a machine powered by an absence: at its centre, that un-namable *thing*, conjuring presence by its sound alone, gesturing towards Kant's *Ding an sich*, in the unknowable realm of truths behind the world's appearances, rather than something whose identity can be discerned and tested through the normal channels. Kant's proposal that our understanding of the object is always forestalled, since something obstinate, irreducible always remains within it, shadows *With Hidden Noise*'s persistent return to the problems of knowledge. For Adorno, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* includes

> an identity philosophy – that is, a philosophy that attempts to ground being in the subject – and also a non-identity philosophy – one that attempts to restrict that claim to identity by insisting on the obstacles, the block, encountered in the subject in its search for knowledge (2001: 66).

Arguably all artworks that appeal to the Readymade – and perhaps all artworks *tout court* – bring into play that reciprocal tightrope that connects and holds in tension the notions of subject and object. *With Hidden Noise* enacts this tiny drama in some very specific ways, summoning the subject through a relation to an object ('someone in particular put this thing inside, at this time and place') then withdrawing it again ('so whose work is this, exactly?'); setting in motion an object at the heart of the work, one that drives its meaning and predicament, then winding it back into the unknowable. So perhaps, then, this is a work which might stand as avatar for Adorno's poise between identity and non-identity, one in which the battle between the visual and the aural also enacts these competing claims. Surface appearances literally block knowledge: the secret object inside cannot be read since the objects around it act to screen and contain this invisibility; and yet, thanks to the aural, to sound, meaning leaks out, like a prisoner tapping on the plumbing. That (for us, imagined) sound, the hidden but persistent noise of the unsound is the link back to identity, in its insistence that we solve the riddle of its subjectivity rather than chain it to an objecthood we will never properly know.

In its very inaccessibility, the unattainable object also approaches the lost, repressed or imaginary body, governed by otherness, that is Lacan's *objet petit a* or 'partial object' and that, even whilst remaining forever out of sight, hastens everything to its tune as an object of desire: "A unique object of desire [*convoitise*] insinuates itself at the heart of love's action, we might say, one that constitutes itself as such. It's an object whose rivalry one precisely wishes to avert, an object that is even loathe to be shown" (1991: 161). Thus it is not so

much any artefact's external form but some enigmatic kernel lurking at its heart that fascinates: "If this object arouses your passion, it is because within it, hidden, there is the object of desire" (1998: 176-77). In his theorization of phantasy and transference (during the 1960-61 seminar *Le transfert*), Lacan proposes as a model the brief dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades towards the end of Plato's *Symposium* which centres on the figure of a humble container which hides the precious *agalma*: a statuette, a gift box, a mystery to be offered to the gods or as Lacan has it, 'a kind of god-trap [*piège à dieux*]'(1991: 166 and 171).[31] Thus the lover finds his or her desire in the beloved, a figure of desire focused not on an ultimately disposable container, but in a longed-for but unattainable jewel within: "Included in the *objet a*", Lacan writes, "is the *αγαλμα*, the inestimable treasure that Alcibiades declares is contained in the rustic box that for him Socrates's face represents."[32] Describing the *agalma*, Alcibiades locates it as being precisely a hollow sculpture representing the performance of sound and problematizing container and content:

> And now, my boys, I shall praise Socrates in a figure which will appear to him to be a caricature, and yet I speak, not to make fun of him, but only for the truth's sake. I say, that he is exactly like the busts of Silenus, which are set up in the statuaries' shops, holding pipes and flutes in their mouths; and they are made to open in the middle, and have images of gods inside them.[33]

[31] The sections relating to Alcibiades and the *agalma* are the seminars of 25 January, 1 February and 8 February 1961 (1991: 151-95). As Lacan notes (163 and 166), the word *agalma* means first of all 'ornament', 'jewellery' or 'jewel', correlating to one of Duchamp's guesses at Arensberg's secret object.

[32] Lacan (1980: 322); see also Cake (2009).

[33] Plato (n.d.). If here the representation of the merriment of sound contains a treasure, but must be opened or broken – silenced – in order to get to it, then this is the opposite of those ornate music boxes, made precisely on the pretext of containing jewels, in which a ballerina revolves as the lid is lifted – a line of reverie that might also help imagine *With Hidden Noise*'s secret object as a stand-in ballerina or Bride.

As Lacan notes, the box is more specifically in the form of the satyr Marsyas, flayed alive for daring to challenge Apollo to a contest of musical virtuosity; except that now the figure shifts to Socrates, not a musician but a specialist in words (1991: 182) – just as *With Hidden Noise* moves to and from sound and text in its games of absence and allure.

Conceptual or imaginative correlations for *With Hidden Noise*'s articulation of presence and absence as a lure for desire and knowledge are legion: Bill Brown's Thing Theory that postulates the 'thing' as an enigmatic excess around an object, at the moment when conventional functions abate (2001 and 2004); Heidegger's *das Ding*, with its problematized nearness (just as *With Hidden Noise*'s object is so close yet never attained), its will to "the unconcealedness of what is already present" exemplified as a jug, made up of a void;[34] Kafka's enigmatic *Odradek*, a worn spool with bits of thread attached, but no clear purpose or identity (from "The Cares of a Family Man" written around 1914-17, so contemporary to Duchamp's object). Is the rattle and then silence of its secret object like the ping of a black box recorder waiting to be found and decoded before it's too late; or the chirp of a cicada, stopping as you get too close? It is as though for us this sound is lost in its anticipated dimension, just as the hidden object that makes it is always foreclosed, only to reappear in another; since we're forbidden its performance, we hear its secret noise instead in the frameworks of our own longing… Maybe the work joins that speculative category of Duchamp's note on a proposed "intaglio music [*musique en creux*] for the deaf", a kind of

[34] Heidegger (1971). For more on Duchamp, Heidegger and the vessel, see Roberts (2013).

sonic braille inviting us to feel the noise in any way but through sound.[35] In these ways, its unsound works to trigger an aural desire, propelled by silence.

So here I am, standing in front of *With Hidden Noise* in its display case. In its latencies, in its potential for resonance, a kind of 'persistence of audition' joins noise and the unsound, braids its actions in other ways as we follow a thread back out of the labyrinth: to read noise, to hear meaning. In its always deferred or delayed performance, the instrument awaits activation. And what noise does it make in its packing case as it shuttles back and forth around the world, recalling the sound of Duchamp rattling around in his New York studio in the decades before his death in 1968, secretly making his last work *Étant données*? The trajectory of this little bleeping satellite has taken it from sound object to an unsound one, waiting to be rung or perhaps still resonating from its previous activations, below the threshold of our perception. These secret noises are akin to a memory of something we have yet to experience but that seems already to have been lived. In this sense, as Walter Benjamin (1979: 345) has it, a noise might connect us across space and time:

> The *déjà vu* effect has often been described. But I wonder whether the term is actually well chosen, and whether the metaphor appropriate to the process would not be far better taken from the realm of acoustics. One ought to speak of events that reach us like an echo awakened by a call, a sound that seems to have been heard somewhere in the darkness of past life. Accordingly, if we are not mistaken, the shock with which moments enter consciousness as if already lived usually strikes us in the form of a sound. It is a word, a tapping or a rustling that is endowed with a magic power to transport us into the cool tomb of long ago, from the vault of which the present seems to return only as an echo.

[35] My translation; see James (1990: 107). James explores '*en creux*' in terms of the intimate 'hollow' of the ear and an absence of sound; but at another level this term may also refer to the intaglio technique of producing braille.

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