In the Absence of Noise, Nothing Sounds: Blanchot and the performance of Harsh Noise Wall

'But the void really let me down'/'mais le vide m'a bien déçu' (Blanchot, *La Folie du jour* 13)

The total artwork, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, promised to bring arts together, cutting a transversal swathe through the separate activities of music, theatre, dance and the visual arts. First used in 1827, the term became synonymous with the grandiose operas or music dramas of Richard Wagner, produced primarily in the 1860s and 1870s. Updated versions of Wagner's operas have expanded into newer media – the model can take over any new set of practices. The complete artwork would supplant all other works, exposing as them as mere entertainment in a quasi-modern re-inscription of the alchemists' Great Work of material transmutation, part of the quest for spiritual and magical transformation. *Gesamtkunstwerk* has been used as 'shorthand to describe a seamless melding of a variety of art forms that overwhelms spectators' emotions, impedes the possibility of critical thought, and molds a group of individuals into a powerless mass' (Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* xi). As for the power of totalizing separate art forms, Wagner notes, that 'precisely in it will each [art form] attain its full value' (cited by Koss 16).

For all that the music and overall conceit were extremely modern, even modernist, Wagner's pan-dimensional works would not only cross between media but also between times and cultures – aspiring to re-create the great mythical dramas of European legends to express a total history and set of morals. This meant that he would need the past in order to make his work so complete it could stand as, or in the

place of, the *Ur-work*. So the total work needs to be understood not only as a horizontal totalization but also as a fundamentally temporally located work. The new total work could function as a new beginning, one that would dredge through the gathered detritus of history, sift it, slowly and on an epic scale, so that the precious ore of the West could arise. We can see how Nietzsche would be first drawn inward to this idea, and then repulsed from it, through the realization that the total work was not a recasting of the primordial encounter between Dionysian and Apollonian forces, but an ideological purification of all history and cultures in favour of one true, 'superior' race and its mythical truths.[1]

Wagner was not alone in his dream of the total work, but others imagined it differently, and arguably the entire trajectory of modernist art is about the meta-genre of the total artwork. Another way of conceiving the total artwork is to think of it as a work of completeness, resolution and definitiveness. This model is also heavily temporal, whilst always looking forward in formal terms, and can be seen in the attempts made by artists to exceed all that had gone before. The work itself would not be as pompously total as the proto-rock operas of Wagner, but would instead be total statements that concluded a line of enquiry, or begin a new one. We could imagine the canonical works of modernism as a sequence of such gestures: it is the logic behind tracing the progression of avant-gardes, it is the logic of creativity as newness, as rejection of the old. Each new work, in this logic, is a new totalization. This is not to lose the specificity of the 'total artwork' but to identify its operational force at the heart of the belief in advancing avant-gardes, in experimentation and radical rejections. In traversing the idea of the total artwork, this essay takes Blanchot's *Le Livre à venir/The Book to Come* as a means of approaching the 21st century avant-garde music that is harsh noise wall, an extreme full-spectrum genre of radical sonic

stasis. I would assert that harsh noise wall is such a good example of Blanchot's reading of Stéphane Mallarmé's attempt at thinking the total Work that it can at the same time be used to unfold Blanchot's own ideas. Within this double reading, I consider the non-arriving work (such as Mallarmé's 'Livre') as model of exhaustion – exhaustion before completion, in a play of abject messianism that implicitly takes Georges Bataille to be lying inside Giorgio Agamben's rethinking of messianism, like Vito Acconci in *Seedbed* (1972).[2] Finally, I look at the curtain as exemplar of the non-presence of work that is harsh noise wall (and Mallarmé's book, as seen by Blanchot), taking my cue from the 'primal scene' in *L'Écriture du désastre/The Writing of the Disaster*. The conclusion is of course both present in the beginning of the analysis and absent from its entirety, especially its ending.

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The total artwork, in the hands of a myriad modernists, promised either to bring arts to a conclusion, or to end them more vigorously or violently. Many would then begin to create work that attacked art or sought to reconfigure the premises of art as a whole. The first avant-gardes, particularly in painting or writing, sought to complete the historical function of a genre (like a good anticipation of Greenberg). In painting, Impressionism sought to undo a hierarchy of skilled techniques but it did so in order to develop painting, likewise Post-impressionism, Cubism, Futurism (for all its destructive rhetoric) and Surrealism (in painting). Dada stands apart as a movement that sought to strip away the authority of artistic presumptions. Abstract expressionism could be seen as either confirming a painterly history of communicating through paint or going against all that had gone before, Pop and minimalism might have been getting at an essence of art but did so by rejecting all the

tools that had been so quickly canonized… and so on. It might be more instructive to look at how particular works of art sought to be the 'total artwork' that would complete some historical, political or philosophical work. In music, we can look at different compositional strategies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and track which of these we could regard as falling on one side or another of the completion-impetus of modernism. In writing, the same decision awaits – with a vast array of works that sought to be total. But maybe we have clearer parallels with Wagner in the dense and lengthy world-building of Marcel Proust, Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Robert Musil, these being among the most explicit illustrations of an interior logic of completion, plenitude (albeit fragmentary) that Deleuze and Guattari aptly observe do not attain the condition of 'n-1' (where the centre of a work entirely dissipates into a rhizomatic whole). Another model of completion might be that of the modernist series – as exemplified in the work of Claude Monet (haystacks, Rouen cathedral, London Bridge, the garden at Giverny) or Paul Cézanne (the Mont Sainte-Victoire).

Cézanne helps us finally to climb through the window and into Blanchot's idea about the total work – the book to end all books that Mallarmé hinted at, for Cézanne showed not just the endless formal possibility that emerges from looking at one thing, in this case a mountain and its surrounding area, but also offered the 'truth in painting'. As Derrida notes in *The Truth in Painting*, Cézanne proposed that truth could now, only now, appear in painting, as painting, and that painting would be truth. For all that Derrida expands one statement into a universe, as hermetic in thought as it is hermeneutic, Cézanne quite clearly aimed to show the truth of, as and in painting, as opposed to painting capturing a pre-existing truth and conveying this. What was conveyed was the conveying, the process of truth, or as Blanchot puts it, the making

of work as its own affirmation, where 'the strange impulse that goes from the work toward the origin of the work, the work itself having become the anxious and boundless search for its own source' (Blanchot, *The Book to Come* 198). In altering the hierarchy between work and 'maker', thus challenging the status of the maker as creator, 'only impersonal neutrality seems to speak' (*The Book to Come* 200).

This makes sense when what the artist seeks is to complete the process of art in an ultimate Work, but what if the artist, in whatever medium, or across all of them, sought incompletion, emptiness or destruction? Within modernism, this moment occurred at several key instances – for example, any work where the question 'is it art?' can be asked of it. Interesting though failure is, not least for Blanchot and the many acceptingly wretched characters in his novels, this is not quite the right question when it comes to modernism in general, to Blanchot, to Mallarmé or to harsh noise wall as total artworks. Instead, it is the absence of (the) work that counts here. This is absence that works as supplement – i.e. it stands in for the presence of the object that is supposed to be there, to be happening, or to have been made. From this absence, the work comes to be, albeit only as absence, or, better (worse), non-presence.

Harsh noise wall is a current attempt to complete a history of moves within noise music, or noise-as-music. It tries to get out from the idea of freeing sound so we can be more creative, and instead seeks to close down options. At its most extreme, it seems to be not much more than a broad spectrum of sound, like white, pink or brown noise, and even those audible distinctions can often be the contingent result of format and production, as opposed to being a core part of the 'work itself'. This type of music does not come from nowhere, despite its interest in absence, and more important than its relation to any history of avant-garde music is its relation to moments in experimental art that have sought to bring either an art, or all art, to its

endpoint. In particular, it belongs to a constellation of artworks that have sought completion through 'radical' or purposeful and significant/a-signifying incompletion (with 'radical' as an empty valence). For Blanchot, that trail begins with Mallarmé.

Blanchot does more than analyze or mobilize Mallarmé's notion of the 'book to come'. He brings out the implications of the idea and the practice (as alluded to in and as Mallarmé's extreme spatial, involuted and recursive *Un Coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard*). For Blanchot, Mallarmé's idea of the book recasts the idea of the total art work. Instead of being a realization, or a realized thing, it is instead about the process of realization of what would be the total (or complete) artwork. Of the avant-garde artist, Blanchot writes that 'each person has to extricate himself from the world… and it is a temptation for everyone to destroy it in order to reconstruct it pure of any previous place, or, even better, to leave the place empty' (*The Book to Come* 207). Any artist tries to clear this space through their making, but Mallarmé, claims Blanchot, clears the space through not making, through a profound emptying. This is because the book will never arrive, never take its place among the real things to be admired as art objects. Partly this is because the ultimate Book will have surpassed all others to such an extent that the rest will not be needed any more, but more importantly, it is because the book will never be capable of being realized, and this in turn, has two aspects. Firstly, the Book is about the prospect of an ultimate artwork, and so will remain ahead as promise. In this way, the Book is the paradigmatic, even Ideal artwork of modernism. Secondly, though, it literally will not happen because it is by definition the work that cannot be. True art will only be present when the attempt at 'the book to come' is made, and is present 'only there where it hides itself and disappears' (*The Book to Come* 206). The book is a necessary thing (to come/à

venir), the presence of art; and its incapacity to exist (still to come/à venir), the absence of art.

Blanchot scorns the empiricist and limited judgement that Mallarmé's missing book is such simply because he did not complete his project. Instead, Blanchot argues that Mallarmé had to both attempt to bring the Book into existence as the ultimate artwork and hold it back, as it 'will never be anything but its holding back' which was or is its true state – like quantum states before decoherence in observation (*The Book to Come* 225). This left the poet in a paradoxical position, and opens up the prospect of a sort of abject messianism that Blanchot spreads through his novels. The adoption of a more heroic messianic vision would have allowed Mallarmé to make no mark of an attempt to bring the Book (to come and not to come), but instead we see some glimpses into the nature of the book, premonitions that echo and subvert the discoveries of mysterious alien objects in the novels of Mark Z. Danielewski or Jeff Vandermeer and going back all the way to Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* from 1973. Mallarmé unearths his own writing as fragments and presents them in 'Igitur', in the three obscure critical pieces gathered under the title 'Quant au livre' ('Regarding the book') and in the posthumously canonical *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard*. This latter is perhaps the closest we have to a bit of 'the Book' – as it crosses genres, art practices and its own words in a paradoxical yet affective/effective spatial construction of itself as itself and nothing more. In fact, it is not self-same, as in making itself, it makes itself as only itself, a space of self-reflection where the artwork it describes (itself to be) should come to be.

Blanchot then explores what it means to encounter this thing which cannot be, writing that if the Book existed, 'they will find only the symptoms of a well-known and thoroughly documented morbid state' (*The Book to Come* 231). Any presence of

the book would not represent a completion, consummation or resolution, but would be only 'the infinite conflict of its obvious presence and its forever problematic reality' (*The Book to Come* 231). In the following section, I will develop the ways in which contemporary harsh noise wall 'music' performs these same processes, absences, and broken promises, but here, it is worth noting the presence of *Un coup de dés* as noise in content and form *and* its mere existence as a kind of noise that *signals* the work. The notion of noise brings us closer to what seems to be the pitfalls in paradoxicality: why try and realize the unrealizable? Only to illustrate that the realization is not happening exactly at the moment it seems to occur. As I have argued elsewhere, noise occurs in place of music, in the place of music. For Blanchot, the artwork appears only when the artwork is absent. The artwork can only be truly absent when it is summoned, and its poor surrogate created. Mallarmé identified his highly complex poems as mere games compared to the truth of the Book, but from Blanchot's perspective, the challenging *Coup de dés* is itself only playing with the idea of the Book, a properly pathetic attempt whose only function is to make itself absent to hint (as a forward-facing trace) at the Book to come (and not to come).

Blanchot goes so far as to say that *Un Coup de dés* is about its own *prevention*: 'everything is arranged so that the poem cannot take place' (*The Book to Come* 233). Blanchot takes as a given what most readers of the poem will perceive – that this is a poem that attempts to encapsulate not only itself but the entirety of poetry, every condition of the possibility of poetry. Furthermore, it does this in a way that does not refer to origins, but instead brings them into being. The words float, crash, skid, tumble, rise, sail and cascade across vast empty spaces defined by the few and seemingly haphazardly spaced lines. Space does not exist independently of the words, but is brought into being by them (and vice-versa), but unlike Einsteinian

spacetime, this 'space is the approach of an *other* space' (*The Book to Come* 237), i.e. it is not even creating itself but something else that is neither a thing nor present, even somewhere else.

Readers of Mallarmé will no doubt be familiar with these ideas, but Blanchot makes sure we apprehend the emptying that these processes and recursions perform, such that the space in *Un Coup de dés* is 'infinitely empty and of an infinitely moving emptiness' (*The Book to Come* 237). Mallarmé is not just opening up the prospect of actual space but emptiness as both itself and something else. Blanchot's deconstructive nihilism approaches the emptiness of 'nothing' and adds (subtracts) Bataille's 'NOTHING' of sovereignty – the nothing that does not even mean nothing as the one truth that we can agree on, in minimally positivist nihilism. As we are about to see, the existence of actual noise, in the place of music, does something similar (as opposed to noise 'in the world' which makes no claim to undermine meaning, music, structure). Harsh noise wall does something similar, but excessively less so. Harsh noise wall is the noise that noise music cannot bring, the act that seems to be ultimate, and yet all it can do is signal the location (or sound, or space) where noise is supposed to be happening, in the place of music. Solid blocks of completely full noise seem to be the opposite of the superficial liberations of *Un Coup de dés*, but work purposely in the light of the poem, and the idea of the Book, when these are darkened and emptied in Blanchot's reading of them.

But this is merely a leap at the moment, and perhaps feels forced, a spurious correlation of two mildly similar affects across over a century's divide. But we can historicize the story of the Book, as an emptying variant of the Gesamtkunstwerk, identifying clear examples of how the artwork lives on its ending, even. Then it will become clearer, maybe, that harsh noise wall is not more than any of these, nor is it

the culmination of either a modernist story of stripping away of an avant-garde story of 'more more more'. Despite sonic appearances, harsh wall noise should not be 'seen' as the ultimate noise or noise music. Its absoluteness lies only in its exhaustion, its attempt to close down the Babel of the historical mountain climb of avant-gardes. This exhaustion has a history, or maybe an unraveling. It can be perceived, has been experienced, in a set of key works which I lay out as talismanic markers – signs of the thing that they are not quite achieving, in line with Mallarmé, and more so, Blanchot's reading of him.

Numerous works by Marcel Duchamp follow in the throw of dice that cannot annul chance, or be it, and attempt to occupy the space of the work that cannot be, yet tries to exist and contain/overcome the Hegelianism of modern art's progress. The readymade removes art in asserting the artfulness of choosing a pre-made object and presenting it in the place of art. John Cage's setting-free of the soundworld in his silent *4'33"* is another canonical moment of stripping away all art in order to make an ultimate statement. Better still, because less tainted with the utopian musicalization and reinjection of content into the emptiness of Cage's silent works, is Yves Klein's range of works connected to 'the void'. I will just note one, the exhibition 'Le Vide', that took place in the Galerie Iris Clert (opening on April 28th, 1958). This featured an emptied gallery, painted white, with blue curtains at the door, an empty cabinet within. All kinds of content can be adduced to this exhibition to replace the habitual one of readily identifiable artworks: the whole is the artwork; the people are the artwork; the artwork is the functioning of the institution; or of the institution (i.e. expectations) of art. From the perspective of a track running through Blanchot's Mallarmé to the harsh noise wall of today, the significant part is the removal of art, in the place of art, so that the residue of art still happens. This does not just empty the

present or past, but indicates a future of emptiness, of prospect itself, freed from content, mission, intention and reception. Chantal Akerman empties and fills film and 'life' in *Chantal Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), with unmoving cameras caught in the sight of the eponymous central character's slowly repeating life. The painstaking and slow film carries a feminist message, but it does so in a way that does not 'explain' the method of the film, it does not alter the viewing of it, even as it offers a structure to the narrative-hungry. As this meaning comes only at the end, it can be regarded as making its point through the working through of the absence of meaning. Michael Asher takes empty galleries and museums and makes those the subject of his work – not just empty of work, but an emptying of the idea of work, a playing out of the absence of it, an absence that is brought here, to a specific institution. Craig Dworkin (in *No Medium*) has supplied a parallel or perhaps para-history of modernist experimentation, arguing that one strand of experimentation in modern art, literature and music has been the removal of content such that the medium becomes a non-medium, losing its capacity to present, to mediate.

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It is no accident that music, and its absence, features strongly in *No Medium*, as he supplies an extravagant list of silent, or crypto-silent 'further listening'. His list includes numerous recognitions of the place of noise in experimentation since the beginning of modernism. Whether we take 19th century composers, or Futurist Luigi Russolo's 1913 manifesto *The Art of Noises*, Satie's perverse experiments, Duchamp's (thin) conceptual sound works or the developments in phonography as our key, noise in music and art has been with us for over a century. Noise has even been seen as paradigm or, better still, syntagm of the avant-garde, representing disruption,

the unexpected, distortion, aggressive creation of sensation, and a drive to excess. This is not the place to rehearse that lineage again, but it does parallel that of the empty form just as much as it entwines with the formalisms and deformations of most avant-garde activities of the 20th and 21st centuries.

A recognizable activity of 'noise music' or noise in the place of music, emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, embedded in industrial music, power electronics and junk noise. Something like noise music emerged, with harsh, loud sound, distortions, machine sounds, breakdown sounds, excess electricities and electronics, waves of noise crashing against one another in a constant fight to get further away from meaning while retaining the mission of music, in so far as audiences would be asked to listen, to reflect, to endure, to enjoy, to have something so strong they had to react. It was not so much that these actions happened for the first time at that point, but that they coalesced into a recognizable set of aims, practices, or negativities (i.e. stances against, in structural opposition). In being theorized, noise soon encountered those who rejected it, who rushed to declare its end. In its generic existence, its fans would also question its continued validity, as they sought something ever more specialist. But more materially than these predictable and non-Blanchotian failures of nerve was the spread of noise music as alter-global avant-gardism. This too succumbed, this time to noise becoming commodity. From popular writings about music through books about rock and on to pop festivals, noise became debased. Even in avant-garde settings, primed listeners moved on, tragically looking for more, but elsewhere. As a result of the success and failure of 1990s noise, and the spread of specialist festivals, artists and listeners of noise began to imagine new microgenres of harsh noise (basically what used to be called noise before that term got 'ruined') and harsh noise wall. These variants did not necessarily produce anything new, but in coming *after*

noise music, in being late, they represent a living on in exhaustion of the processes of noise.

Bearing in mind this empiricist substrate, we can think of the push to noise within modernism as a desire to approach the totality of sound, to add more, to make what you have into more, to make the audiences feel that what they experience is somehow more. From the Futurist Russolo to noise paragon Merzbow, noise is additive, excessive, a quantitative sublime. Douglas Kahn has argued that John Cage's opening up of the world of sound into the ears of audiences was actually a way of controlling the noise of the world, of bringing it into musicalisation (Kahn, *Noise Water Meat* 162-4). As Blanchot says, 'writing contains exteriority' (*Infinite Conversation* 432), so when noise finds its way into music, music has constrained what was its other, whilst demonstrating what is other to it. All music does this (as Jacques Attali has noted), but noise (or experimental writing) illustrates the process of containing exteriority – consciously bringing the outside in, showing it as outside of music (in terms of improper sound) at the same time as being outside (different to and separate from) the outside of the world (as brought into being by the existence of music or something like it as that which defines what it is not as the space in which it happens).

But still, noise stilled noisiness in bringing it inside the inside of music to wreck the latter. Instead of falling into decrepitude, music accepted the gift and noise would come to be heard, by some at least, as music, in the sense of Edgard Varèse's notion of music being 'organized sound'. And yet, the paradoxicality of 'noise music' never goes away, only being overcome by a sort of Hegelian listenership which has always already tired of what is on offer as the new, the audience identified by Baudelaire as anti-modern seekers of novelty as opposed to the capture of now. Noise

did not 'win'. It lost. This may be disappointing but I think it is something of which 'noise artists' have been fully aware, certainly since the 1980s, and have often worked toward.

While 'harsh noise' is an attempt to continue the work of non-conservatoire experimentalism in music, it is also somewhat familiar, despite the many available strategies for noisiness beyond the structure of the pieces produced. Instead of thinking about failure, harsh noise wall accepts it, lives on within it, and whilst appearing full, is full of emptiness. Taking Blanchot's idea of the possible as 'an empty frame' (*Infinite Conversation* 41), it tries to move beyond a stock nihilism, as 'there is still too much positivity in nothingness' (*Inifinite Conversation* 403). Noise music, in the hands of someone like Merzbow, is about fullness, about adding force, sounds, distortions, volume, texture, disruptions, patch geometries offering endless variation and wave forms. Harsh noise wall, or wall noise, ostensibly tries to go further, in offering a full spectrum sound that is almost solid. Where harsh noise as an approach maintains a drive to excess, the excess of harsh noise wall is about its stasis. Like Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, consuming pure adrenaline and then experiencing an ultimate rigidity, harsh noise wall is full of nothing, an empty fullness. It is 'empty because of its plenitude' (*Infinite Conversation* 36).

Solid masses of sound lurch into being and end by being cut off abruptly. Even the ending of harsh noise wall is weirdly subtle – the mass of pummelling yet bathing sound is cut immediately, seemingly to create a shock effect, but actually it illustrates the total arbitrariness of beginning and end – and the last ga(s)p of the human controller, pretending they have the power to intervene in chance. Blanchot helps us to think about the impossibility of stopping the futile sound that is harsh

noise wall. It is more like the sound being burrowed or re-channelled elsewhere, back to where it was already (not) happening. Harsh noise wall is certainly nihilist, but one that is aware of the posture of nihilism, and the inescapability of posture. Nihilism will not save you. Or tell you anything. But somewhere between Blanchot and harsh noise wall is the prospect of an infrathin distinction being drawn between the wall noise and itself, via the medium of the world in which it occurs. This does not mean that harsh noise wall is solipsistic, although it can seem that way – rather it trades on solipsism as failed answer to existence. Before fleshing 'the already decaying remains of Lazarus' (*Infinite Conversation* 35) with an examination of French artist Vomir and others, we should note that expansive, additive, blatantly excessive noise 'music' demands of the listener a process of grasping parts of a complex whole. Harsh noise wall asks the listener to find distinction and complexity where there may be none. Both instill a search for pattern, but harsh noise or noise 'music' is about forming a pattern from distinct elements, and harsh noise wall is the coalescing of pattern or variation as possible auditory illusion from a flat yet full morass. Noise music as mesh, harsh noise wall as mass.

Vomir is not the first to make wall noise, but maybe the most consistent. With titles of avowed nihilist separatism such as *Claustration* (a five CD long piece of total wall noise, issued in a 6 CD box in 2007), or *Proanomie* (2009), Romain Perrot 'celebrates' extraction from life, and from art. The accompanying visual artwork is often very simple, dark, reflecting the absence of variation in the work (including between works, where much of the sound variation is the result of format, or production 'quality'), but also it is occasionally more extreme. At those moments, Vomir is most blatantly part of a genre, or meta-genre of apparent artistic extremity, based on pornographic or violent imagery, in play since industrial music's beginnings

in the late 1970s. Both Vomir and Richard Ramirez (mainstay of Black Leather Jesus and Werewolf Jerusalem) will use imagery of graphic nature – and sometimes highly sexualized, with an emphasis on bondage and confinement – as complements to these sounds. The genres of harsh noise and harsh noise wall are full of this, but my main criticism is that this choice makes it too easy to dismiss the formal and conceptual complexities of the sound. For Ramirez, for example, it is very important to be erotically 'out', and so illustrates and titles his works accordingly, with men in restrictive fetish clothing, restraints and otherwise objectified male bodies. For Vomir, when using more sexualized imagery, the point of interest is always about sensory deprivation (ironically or otherwise). In these two instances, it seems there is a direct link between bondage-based sexuality and the affective physicality of solid noise sound, but arguably in some genre examples, the imagery is there as a lazy shorthand or titillation, a kind of emperor's latex clothes. The more interesting question is how can we hear this 'content', and better still, how does this content disappear within the form such that we have an absent work, a nothing that is empty even of utopian and recuperable nihilism? What happens if we listen for content in Black Leather Jesus' harsh noise album *United States of Persuasion* (2005) which features the tracks 'Bush in Bondage', 'Manipulating the Masses' and 'The President's Piss Boy'? Or if we listen to Vomir's *Murderous Passion is Nylon Seduction* (2015)? The likelihood is that a listener transposes the idea conveyed by the title to the work – especially as the work has so little guidance within it. Put a title on vacuous noise, cynics might say, and you can simulate an audience reaction, or manufacture a pretext for excitement among a self-selecting collector elite.[3]

Like the works of Georges Bataille, and those artists he loved, the appearance of erotic or deadly eroticism is a lure – the pretence of an ultimate content whose

thrill or jouissance dissipates in the practice. The practice becomes something else, something formal or formalist to the point where form has no sense, where even formlessness has no hold. The extravagantly suggested content is exactly how harsh noise and harsh noise wall creates work where the work is not, where the place outside of the work loses traction in the face of it, but the work also disappears as it happens. The quest for the extreme is precisely where the extreme cannot happen, just as the quest for noise reveals the location of noise not happening. This is a re-siting of how artistic work empties the place it happens in, by first using the resources of art to separate off from the world, then separating artwork from perceiver. Then, the noise work attempts to overpower its consumer but in so doing becomes pathetic, a slave-noise, a nothing unfolding. All art probably does this, from Blanchot's point of view, but only some can make it happen. Just as Blanchot's ideas about Mallarmé's book or his own writings make 'clear', the attempt to get beyond is the locating of the attempt to get beyond as that which reaches into the beyond as the trace of actually doing that work. And this is all that can happen. Paradoxically, I would claim, this does not happen in a literal absent work such as that of Cage, or Klein, or closed galleries, but in a fullness so thick it offers no space for even itself to happen.

Like *Un coup de dés*, noise can never abolish noise – attempts to leave meaning and music behind do not just fail, they construct the absence of noise, which previously simply was not. The existence of noise in the place of music brings a new absence into a place it now has always occupied. Not only that, but harsh noise and harsh noise wall displace noise music's attempts to conquer the limits of aesthetic sound and listening. Harsh noise wall in particular stops noise in the removal of variation. For many, 'pure' noise music is soothing, meditative, or even just boring. Many seek the sense of the infinite offered by ever-increasing noise adaptation and

exaptation and feel that wall noise falls short. But wall noise is precisely the falling short as the glimpse of noise that does not at any point (except for a microscopic moment, and that perhaps when it stops sounding) emerge into reality: 'The Work, the absolute of voice and writing, unworks itself (*se désœuvre*) even before it has been accomplished, before in accomplishing itself, it ruins the possibility of accomplishment' (*Infinite Conversation* 428). Harsh noise wall is 'not the abyss, but the edge of the abyss' (*Infinite Conversation* 428). This does not mean we totter safely at the border, but instead it proffers the idea that there is only edge, that the abyss is a construct that reassures us when we are not falling into it. But the experience of an edge as everything is the disappearance of being into the infrathin.

  This still sounds potentially epic and tragic, so it is important to remember how meaningless the loss of meaning is, particularly with the harsh noise wall of Vomir. The consumer of harsh noise wall recordings may have reflected on the title and cover art, but it is the morass of sound that takes over. As this takes over, the power is continual – the relational force produced is very different to that produced by other concerts of recordings – but that power is also loaded and undermined by the pathetic parody of noise that it constitutes. The predictability of the many hundreds of Vomir releases is amusing as well as creative of intensity. Yet this sameness is not a given – even one Vomir piece will sound different on repeated listens, just as each part fractally varies as the listener's attention focuses, drifts, moves away, gets caught, stumbles, ruins, moulds the sound into shapes and narrative. But whatever the listener does, the wall noise defeats attempts to master it by first refusing mastery in its apparent simplicity and properly brutal pointlessness. The absurdity is how it removes the prospect of anyone 'winning' through understanding, apotheosis, depth,

creative control, listening expertise… it fabricates an absence where those things were expected to occur.

Blanchot writes that 'the Work becomes aware of itself and thereby seizes itself as something that would coincide with the absence of the work' (*Infinite Conversation* 424), and this is precisely the process at play in wall noise. The 'wall' of wall noise attempts to create a confined space away from the alienations of contemporary capitalism and spurious socialities. The wall is not about power but about thresholds. As the volume of noise crosses a threshold into the experience of noise, the protective power of the shared acoustic space grows (especially in performance settings). The wall makes absence into sonic material, through the process of its own soundmaking. Instead of being joined in an ecstatic rapture, an audience is joined in a-sociality – something that Vomir's Perrot signaled with the distribution of plastic bags for audience members at concerts to put on their heads. He too would do this as he stood statically for the performance, and while no musical gestures happened. The entire work is hidden, walled-off, as a pre-prepared recording is played and he stands still. This is the weirdness of a Vomir un-work, as opposed to the industrial soul of visibly wrenching bits of equipment, metal and knobs. This is one more literalization of the absence of work that builds into the Work as absence of work, of even itself, let alone all other expectations of what should constitute even experimental work.

In concert, the combination of sonic plenitude and removal of technique, removal of aesthetic stimulus, brings the work into position as an absence. In aiming in multiple ways for a pure nihilism, it not only fails, it covers over the place where nothing may have been before anyone tried to observe or hear it. To listen at home is to welcome the absurd, as you begin to wonder, without constraint and validation of

other dupes, whether this listening is itself a foolish activity – in an exact opposition to the moralistic goodness of listening after Cage. There is almost no listening to be done here – in the place of listening. Finally, it can just stop. But it does not.

Listening to Vomir releases opens up the prospect of a totally entropic soundworld, where no one part can impinge enough on another to create structure, meaning, process or sequence. While the sound does continue, as shown by the digital clocks on CD players or computers, it does not match the progressive nature of clock time. Instead, it parodies it, and in so doing, opens a glimpse into something it actually does, a sliver of almost not-nothing, and that is the sense of embodied time. This is not the cozy durational time of Bergson but an awkward sense of that time elapsing, a negative relational time. Canadian artist The Rita (Sam McKinlay) took a different direction into the materiality of noise time with the *Dark Leviathan Abyss* cassette from 2004 (on the 'Waste of Plastic' series), which consist of two tracks of just over 30 seconds each. These tracks rumble and throb, mutedly, an effect heightened by the tape medium. The soothing effect that is possible from the solid noise of harsh noise wall (The Rita has made many albums of that type of noise) is stripped away, without encouraging the eventful nature of 'standard' harsh noise with its discordant introduction of whirs, buzzes, mounting feedback, rapid on/off gestures on a mixing desk, thumps of instruments, junk or microphones. But still, the noise piece is the total length – no variation except that which emerges from the steady state.

The sound of harsh noise wall is cut off at the end of every Vomir release, but they suggest themselves to be fractal parts of a whole that is the all the same, all the way up, down or across. How to choose one? Why choose one? The sound itself resists meaning and meaningful unity as a piece as it is not separate enough form the

others – each part if in this sense (im)properly abject, between states and troubling for that reason, much more than because of a supposed 'extremity' of sound. Again, in exact opposition to Cagean listening, this nothingness is not even worth anything – it is not a big gesture once it repeats forever. Instead it goes on and on for no reason, a living-on in the 'exhaustion of feeling' (*The Writing of the Disaster* 116). While suggesting the dark matter that underpins the matter humans can sense, Vomir's 'music' is what prevents it coming into being. The existence of the harsh noise wall work is the precise removal of the possibility of noise actually forming an event. In fact, even the formless gives way to something less, something not even devoid of form. Entropic, fractal, but also a solidity that has no form.

This is not just a conceit, as we add entropy, fractality and empty solidity together, the sound of complete fullness stills the possibility of any event from happening, let alone some sort of nihilist truth of the inherent nothingness of the universe. That idea is in there of course, but faced with Vomir's wall, that nothing gives way to a nothing that cannot not happen. The fullness of a work such as *Here Goes Nothing* (2015), a full-length CD release creates a nanofibre (like graphene) between the nothing of reality and the nothing of not even being nothing. And then this nanofibre disappears, taking the two parts that were around it away. The work then, such as it is, or such as it sits in the place a work should be, is the disaster of its own removal through existing (*Infinite Conversation* 429). This is a soft disaster, not the Romantic trauma-drama of rolling kettle drums and evocatively dark synthesizer sounds. The massive volume of noise (even when played quietly) of harsh noise wall 'renders invisible the invisibility of a colourless flame' (*Infinite Conversation* 430). This process is itself hidden under the superficial presence (superficially very-present) noise of the wall. Instead the bad faith of epic silent works is shunned in favour of an

absurd, even abject attempt to create a total sound, and this total sound acts as a cover for all that it 'is'.

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Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster* witnesses a primal scene, one served up semi-parodically, but it is the basis of finally tying harsh noise wall and Blanchot to where they can no longer escape each other, like the leg-bound narrator in Blanchot's novel *Aminadab*. The moment is introduced as something unreliable, but also a lure with the promise of its being '(a primal scene?)' (*Disaster* 72). A child pulls back a curtain, but does not complete the task ['écartant le rideau' (*Désastre* 117)], he looks and holds at the same time. The normal world of outdoors gives way suddenly:

> What happens then: the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black
>
> and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an
>
> absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein – so lost
>
> that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing
>
> is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. (*Disaster* 72)

The connection to the nihilistic understanding of the universe that is harsh noise wall is clear – perhaps too clear. The interesting part is not the 'dark reality' but the moment of revelation and the framing. The event is the looking past the curtain, through the broken window [vitre brisée]. The blackness is not the real but the real which cannot be present and is shielded by all the other emptinesses of being, framing, looking, listening, understanding, empirical fact or process. The black sky is maintained inside the child as a secret, hidden, even internally, curtained again. The

curtain in this 'primal scene' is the mode of access. The window is not. It is a re-flattened plane beyond which the black may or may not be, because this broken window refers, I think to a series of paintings by René Magritte (starting with *The Human Condition* [1933]), where painting and window merge inside a painting as part of a sequence of frames that add up to a comment on the understanding of reality as only ever being via, even *as* a series of frames. So the black sky in broken window is the thing glimpsed, and it is the curtain-holding that permits it.

Historically, precious or obscene works were hidden behind a curtain. The function of 'curtainality' changes with Yves Klein. His show, *Le Vide*, mentioned above, was framed by a bold blue curtain. The curtain revealed only the absence of art, and so created the moment of artfulness within which nothing would happen, actually, presently – to cover over and act as trace of something like the glimpsed black sky. Similarly, harsh noise wall, particularly that of Vomir, is not even noise, as it comes to frame noise, as it comes to happen instead of noise. To Romain Perrot's mantra (stated in interview with John Wisniewski) of his artistic future being one of 'no change, no development, no idea, no remorse', we could add 'no noise'. But not silence. Noise as its own negativity.

Harsh noise wall reveals nothing but it shields us from direct encounter with that nothing, in trying to bring us toward it. It is an absent work that operates as prospect, a closed prospect. Blanchot has his narrator of *The Madness of the Day* waste away from living behind curtains (*Folie* 19), but more appropriately, the narrator of *Aminadab* actually hears noise behind a thick door, which in turn is 'covered with thick curtains' (*Aminadab* 3). It is as he waits in front of this extraneous barrier that he can hear distant noise. Later, when he has made the mistake of being curious and enters a world of passivity and arbitrariness there will be more curtains –

around a bed, hiding a rope ladder, or disguising a window, eventually sieving through some light.

The curtain suggests the rich epistemology of the veil, the ontology of the fold, the metaphysics of the *parergon*, but the hallucinatory divide/connection between Blanchot and Vomir suggests something less that supplants all those logics. But Blanchot's curtains are firm, unsuggestive but essential. Essentially brute, material, they are the nothing that holds firm around the something of the world that is actually nothing. We are, as Blanchot noted above, always only on the edge of the abyss, such that the abyss is edge not depth. In harsh noise wall, particularly the explicitly philosophized nihilism of Vomir, listeners are placed in front of a temporal boundary which is the time of the performance: as it happens (on recording or 'live' where Perrot plays a pre-recorded piece). The duration becomes monofilament, a sonic trace of what cannot be (noise). Harsh noise wall is a Blanchotian curtain, placing anyone foolish enough to pay attention to it into a place where at least attention can be drawn to what is not happening, a time that is not, and a presence that covers over its 'presence' like a film of filth. Scum. The imagined curtain works as a replica and cover of the spatialization sought by Mallarmé, Blanchot and Vomir. It makes the nanofibrous line of harsh noise wall more relatable, more relational in terms of signification processes. But still it provides only the absence of an answer.

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[1] See Nietzsche's scathing renunciation in *The Case of Wagner*, written in 1888.
[2] See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains* (2005) in particular. *Seedbed* saw Acconci tucked away, for two weeks, under a raised floor in the gallery (Sonnabend, in New York), masturbating as visitors walked about on the false floor above him.
[3] This may be what Scum Culture thought when preparing *Any Retard Can Make Harsh Noise Wall* (undated, uploaded to YouTube 2017).

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