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Art and Technological Sound: The Revival of Experience

Paul Landon

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Art and Technological Sound: The Revival of Experience

Paul Landon

This thesis interprets the work of five contemporary artists who combine technologically reproduced sound with visual elements in their production. Installations by Joseph Beuys, Stan Douglas, Joey Morgan, Bill Viola and Michèle Waquant are analyzed. The relationship between art and technology is discussed in the context of the historical avant-garde's attempts to popularize art through technology in the beginning of the twentieth century. Arguments are made to suggest that the multi-media nature of technological art allows its viewers to experience it sensorially. A hypothesis is made stating that this experience is similar to the pre-technological experience of art posited by Walter Benjamin.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Background

My interest in sound and art comes from personal experience. I worked as an artist for several years producing experimental videos and found myself concentrating more and more on the soundtracks of these tapes. The 'immaterial presence' of sound struck me; sound affected the way the image was 'felt'. As I experimented with video installations I became aware of sound's spatial attributes; a small speaker emitting a quiet noise could fill a whole gallery with sound. I subsequently produced a series of sound installations, exploring different sounds and different technological apparatuses for their capacity to transmit sounds: speakers, microphones, radios, walkie-talkies, etc. I was excited by the potential these devices held for transforming and displacing an aural signal. As well, a curious affinity was established between the functional presence of the electronic equipment and the sense of dislocation that sounds without images produced on the viewers.

My own work led me to investigate the works of other artists using sound. I found the instances when artists introduced aural elements into otherwise visual works most interesting.¹ It was as if these artists could not express their intentions with images alone. The sounds gave their work another dimension, both spatial, as sound fills space, and temporal, as sound implies duration. These characteristics of sound were particularly pertinent when the works addressed conditions of memory and presence, when they affected the

¹ I discovered, however, that I was less interested in 'audio art', or work produced by artists and musicians who consciously set out to 'make sounds'. Often this work is more an experimentation with musical forms (with home-made instruments or with alternate concert sites) than an attempt at subverting the visual conventions of art.

individual experience of the viewer.

I became particularly interested in how changing techniques of aural reproduction and communication have altered individuals' experiences of themselves, their environment and their communities. My previous training in the Visual Arts had introduced me to artists who used communication technologies. I entered Media Studies to investigate the larger issues surrounding technology and communication; to understand the social and cultural implications of communication technology I found that I had to go beyond the aesthetic scope of the Fine Arts.

Field of Inquiry

The prevalence of artworks using sound has become more and more apparent in exhibitions of contemporary art over the past decade.² However, few writers attempt to deal with this hybrid art form. The recent history of artists working with sound is incomplete and patchy. Douglas Kahn in the introduction to *Wireless Imagination*, which documents early experiments by artists with radio, explains why aural practices evade historicisation. "As a historical object, sound cannot furnish a good story or consistent cast of characters nor can it

² Twenty-nine artists (and artist couples or groups) participated in the inaugural exhibition of international contemporary art, *Pour la suite du monde*, in the new premises of the *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal*. Of these, five used sound in the works they chose to exhibit. This is a significant number of works in an exhibition which did not focus specifically on technological (or multi-media) art. Gilbert Boyer, Muntadas, Adrian Piper and Marcel Odenbach exhibited installations which played back recorded sounds while Hans Haacke's shopping carts incorporated the mechanical sound of dozens of waving flags. As well, two of the other artists exhibited works that self consciously referred to their own lack of sound. Barbara Steinman presented an array of illuminated signs that read "Silence". The subjects seen in Bill Viola's video installation were sleeping; the absence of sound accompanying the video images accentuated the evocation of somnolence.

validate any ersatz notions of progress or generational maturity." (Kahn 1992, p.2)

It is often hard to track down aural documentation of instances in which artists experimented with sound. Many of these were never recorded and for those that were the recordings are not always available. Due to the ephemeral nature of much of the carriers of technologically reproduced sound, records, tapes, the information is often not stable and diminishes with time and wear. "The history is scattered, fleeting, and highly mediated – it is as poor an object in any respect as sound itself." (Kahn 1992, p.2)

Not only have some activities been poorly, if at all, documented there has been a tendency for the work to slip between the gaping cracks separating the disciplines. There are few precedents in art history, a discipline concerned primarily with visual manifestations of culture, for writing about sound.³ Unlike artists' video or film, there have been very few attempts at identifying a commonality among artists who use sound. The tendency is to refer audio art back to an already established discipline or field of inquiry. Sound works have been described in musical terms as *musique concrète*. Sound works with text can be heard as a recorded play or poetry and provoke a literary analysis. Of

³ There have, however, been some important theories coming from the visual discourse concerning artists' use of technology. In 1978 Rosalind Krauss wrote "The Aesthetics of Narcissism" an analysis of video art which postulated, using Lacan's theories of the self as a projected object, that video art was primarily an exercise in narcissism. The true medium of video art was not, according to Krauss, a technological process, but a psychological state. (Krauss 1978, p. 184)

Rosalind Krauss identified a commonality in video art that was not based on a predetermined creative discipline (painting, music, theatre), nor was it specific to the formal possibilities of video technology (i.e. slow motion, electronic special effects, colourisation etc.) By selecting and describing a number of artists' sound works I posit a similar type of commonality for sound art by maintaining that certain artists, who use technological sound in their work, seek to transmit temporal experience through sound.

the artists I discuss, Bill Viola is primarily considered to be a video artist, Michèle Waquant is known for her photo and video work, and Stan Douglas is often referred to as a conceptual artist.

I propose to address the why of artists' sound rather than the how. That is to say: instead of concentrating on how artists use sound in their work, I will consider what it is they wish to express with sound. It is my contention that sound art is a part of a larger contemporary art paradigm which includes video, performance and installation. All these activities are symptoms of artists attempting to bring temporality to their work.

In the 1960s and 1970s a fundamental shift in the nature of the art object took place. Beginning with minimalism and becoming more apparent with performance, video, and sound art, the artwork lost its own inherent presence and became an event to be experienced. This 'duration of experience', as it was referred to by Michael Fried, required that the spectator experience the artwork in order for it to be complete. The onus placed on the viewer's experience with minimalism is only increased with the advent of temporal and technological art. Douglas Crimp remarked on Fried's critique of minimalism that "... if temporality was implicit in the way minimal sculpture was experienced, then it would be made thoroughly explicit – in fact the only possible manner of experience – for much of the art that followed." (Crimp 1984, p. 176)

Many visual artists of the 1980s and 1990s have taken to using sound to construct work with a temporal dimension. They use sound in their work because sound combined with images can communicate a temporal experience in a way that a fixed image cannot. In Michèle Waquant's *Impression débâcle* we hear a multitude of recorded voices recounting the

event of ice breaking up on a river. These give the installation the form of a multi-faceted narrative.

Artists often use technologically reproduced sounds because they are readily available in contemporary society. They reflect the contemporary experience of hearing via electronic apparatus, via the telephone, via the television speaker, via public address systems, via home entertainment units. In Bill Viola's installation **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** the viewer is required to listen to part of the soundtrack through headphones. This recalls the contemporary experience of putting on headphones to focus only on the sounds we wish to hear by isolating ourselves aurally.

These artists are aware that technological reproduction radically transforms sound. Ever since we have been able to reproduce, transmit and amplify sounds, our concept of sound has fundamentally changed. A sound is no longer limited to the time it was made; it can be stored and retrieved. A voice no longer has to accompany the person speaking; with technology sound has been severed from its source. Or, as R. Murray Schafer puts it, "We have split the sound from the makers of the sound." (Schafer 1969, p. 43) Technological sound is distinct because it is a copied sound. Roy Armes in *On Video* writes,

...the transfer of a sound from one environment to another – which happens inevitably when a sound is recorded and replayed – must change that sound, even if we are able to perceive of a record-replay system which does not offer any distortion whatsoever. (Armes 1988, p. 168)

Joey Morgan's **Fugue** was particularly disturbing for her listeners as they heard the tremendous sound of buildings being demolished without being able to locate immediately its source.

In this thesis, I focus on a specific category of sound, on electronically reproduced sound. And, I posit that beyond being one of many categories of sounds, electronic reproduction actually alters sound's ontological presence.

2. Theoretical Framework

I do not intend this to be a comprehensive survey of contemporary artists who use sound in their work. Instead, I have chosen works that best illustrate my theoretical framework and support my thesis. In most cases, I refer to works that I have actually heard as it is important to experience this work before interpreting it.

The objects of my research are five recent art works which use and/or refer to technologically reproduced sound. I analyse 'sound works' by artists active today, by Stan Douglas, Joey Morgan, Bill Viola and Michèle Waquant. I refer as well to a small selection of works by the late Joseph Beuys.

An implicit 'modern' thread ties these works together. They all reflect certain aspects of the modern condition. Some of these works make direct references to modern technologies; Douglas uses turn-of-the-century archival film footage, Beuys, a gramophone and a piano (an early mechanical form of home entertainment).

Other works refer to phenomena specific to modernity: Viola and Morgan both refer to the effects of the modern project of large-scale reconstruction. Viola's piece is dedicated to a nineteenth-century labourer who suffered a serious on the job accident working for the railways. Morgan used the sounds from the demolition of a row of houses (of urban transformation) in her piece **Fugue**.

Waquant's piece questions the regional identity of a community in the modern era of mass-communication. She recorded local voices recounting a natural ritual (the spring thaw causing the river's ice to break up) which traditionally bonded a rural community at the end of each winter. Waquant then

displaced this event en masse, via audio and video technology, to a modern gallery space in an urban centre.

It is necessary to situate the practice of the artists that I discuss in this thesis. There is an avant-garde spirit in their work as they attempt to break the conventions of established cultural practises. However, the term avant-garde is an historical one. The historical avant-garde withered with the depression and the military build-up leading up to the Second World War. The project of the experimental artists of the early century to reconcile art with daily life failed. Art is still institutionalised and artists still must work within 'art' institutions which manifest themselves as galleries, journals, art colleges, etc. But, these institutions remain marginalised from mainstream society; contemporary art is no longer avant-garde nor has it become mass-culture.

I look to the historical avant-garde as it has been analysed posthumously by Peter Bürger, Andreas Huyssen and Renato Poggioli. These offer a retrospective on the theories of Walter Benjamin and on the Frankfurt School as well as an explanation for the marginalisation of contemporary art, a condition under which all the artists that I write about work.

I also refer to several theories written in Europe during the early twentieth century, selected aspects and critiques of modernism, to contextualise historically these artists' practises. Henri Bergson's concepts concerning the flow of time and the function of memory are particularly appropriate for discussing the mnemonic aspect of these temporal works. I look to the work of Theodor Adorno because he witnessed and was critical of the technological transformation of art and culture earlier in the century; echoes of this transformation resurface in the technological art of the late twentieth century. I

place special emphasis on the writings of Walter Benjamin because of his critique of mass-reproduction technologies but also because he identified a form of experience that existed prior to these technologies. I have found Benjamin's ideas about the effect of technology on experience useful when addressing the effects of the artworks I write about.

Modern Art and Technology

Artists' first interventions with modern reproduction technologies⁴ coincide with the advent of the historical avant-garde in Europe around the time of the First World War. The first decades of the twentieth century was a time when artists were seriously questioning their role in society. While defenders of modernism insisted that high art and mass-culture remain separate the avant-garde sought an inclusive relationship between high and low. "Bourgeois society sought 'cultural legitimation' from art. The avantgarde responded with 'cultural revolt'." (Huysen 1986, p. 5)

Perhaps the most influential and certainly the most memorable factions of the avant-garde were the groupings of Dada artists based in Paris, Berlin, and Zurich. Dada rejected the established institutions which isolated privileged art forms from everyday life. While other, more accepted forces of modernism sought to maintain an autonomous aesthetic realm Dada represented a radical break with the "... referential mimetic aesthetic and its notion of the autonomous and organic work of art." (Huysen 1986, p. 9)

⁴ In his book *On Video* Roy Arnes identifies the inventions of photography (1839), phonography (sound recording and playback using a phonograph) (1878), and cinema (1895) as the first phase of modern reproduction technology development that ultimately resulted in the audio video media of today.

Technology was privileged in the avant-garde's attempt to popularise and politicise art. The new media of reproduction offered new modes of perception and the possibility of an "avantgardist mass culture." (Huysen 1986, p. x) Technology played an important role in the transformation of art. It fuelled the artistic imagination with unprecedented possibilities for size, speed and power; the practises of collage, montage and assemblage were inspired by and made possible through the new technologies of reproduction.

The goal of the historical avant-garde was to use technology to change society by transforming everyday life. Ultimately, as Andreas Huysen concedes, it was the culture industry that succeeded, with the use of technology, where the avant-garde failed, and transformed everyday life. The avant-garde may not have affected everyday life to the degree that they had intended but there is no doubt that their activities radically changed the production and reception of art.

Huysen observed how technology changed not only conditions of production for a work of art, but also the conditions for its reception and ultimately its social role. Referring to Duchamp's ready-mades, Huysen writes, "... Marcel Duchamp succeeded in destroying what Benjamin called the traditional art work's aura, that aura of authenticity and uniqueness that constituted the work's distance from life ..." (Huysen 1986, p. 10) Thus, Duchamp succeeded in creating works that rejected aesthetic norms and referred directly, as objects, to everyday life.

The sound works that I examine are the result of a historical process begun by the avant-garde in which artists transform the technologies of mass reproduction to produce works which subvert established aesthetic criteria. All

the works that I analyse evoke the distinct perspectives of the artists who made them without revealing any explicit traces of their hands as they are made up mainly of audio–visual equipment. In Morgan's, Douglas', Viola's and Waquant's installations one of the first things the viewer sees (and hears) are the ominous loudspeakers. Yet, the unique subjectivities of these artists are nevertheless highly discernible through this non–conventional media. The historical avant–garde set the stage for this contemporary practise, by bypassing the limitations of high art, and using technology to reflect individual sensibilities and experiences.

Technology and the Transformation of Aesthetic Experience

Prior to industrialisation, the individual participated in many social activities and undertook a variety of tasks to earn a living. With industrialisation comes economic rationalisation and specialisation of the work force. The worker's experiences are limited to his or her specialised task. Peter Bürger calls this a 'shrinking of experience'. (Bürger 1984, p. 33) The specialised individual is still capable of receiving and reflecting upon his or her environment but cannot relate his or her specialised experience to a larger shared experience of everyday life. According to Bürger, aesthetic experience, belonging to the subsystem art, is a specialised experience among many. Subsequently, the reception of art becomes as valid an experience as any other but, like any other specialised experience, art does not communicate with a broader experience of everyday life.

Differently formulated: aesthetic experience is the positive side of that process by which the social subsystem 'art' defines itself as a distinct sphere. Its negative side is the artist's loss of any social function. (Bürger 1984, p. 33)

Benjamin maintained that art produced using modern technologies of reproduction, photography, reprography and cinema, is one facet of this disappearance of experience. The nature of experience has been radically transformed through the rapid technological change societies have undergone during the past two centuries. As our perceptions of time and space have both been changed so has the way in which we experience art.

Marshall McLuhan recognised a shift in experience when he spoke of the transformation of aural to visual culture, with the printing press, and back to aural culture with the development of electronic media. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* he stipulates that the concept of unconscious was born with the development of movable type. This rationalisation of experience into a rigid linear structure did not allow for the more ephemeral and inexplicable instances of one's life to be transcribed. Thus these moments were said to occupy another, an unconscious, place in the individual. McLuhan notes that our awareness of our unconscious is in part due to the rational authority we ascribe to the printed word. "Paradoxically, then, the first age of print introduced the first age of the unconscious." (McLuhan 1962, pp. 244–245)

McLuhan looked to the audio–visual technologies of this century as conduits for latent forms of experience, for the unconscious, for memory, to enter into the mainstream of collective identity. With the audio–visual media of television, radio and film, McLuhan's thesis held that these interior experiences could be communicated more directly through the electronic media than they

previously could be through writing. The soundtrack heard through the headphones of Viola's installation is intended as an electronic reconstruction of an individual's inner thoughts, of the unconscious of someone else. This reconstruction is successful because it is aural, because, through hearing, we are led to believe we are experiencing another's unconscious.

Walter Benjamin's position vis-à-vis technologically disseminated culture was not optimistic. He maintained that technological reproduction effaced the experience inscribed by the hands of an artist in a work of art. Originally, according to Benjamin, the experience of an artwork was one of contemplation; we waited for the object of contemplation (the artwork) to reveal itself to us and we always maintained a distance from it. The aura of an original art object was maintained by 'the unique phenomenon of a distance' between the observer and the artwork. With mechanical reproduction, that distance is eliminated by bringing the object closer through macro photography, cinematic projection, and modern reproduction techniques which allow for multiple copies of the object of contemplation. To further Benjamin's thesis, with the electronic technologies of radio and television, experience becomes immediate, contemplation has also been eliminated.

But Benjamin's critique of technology was written between two World Wars. He had seen the destructive potential of military technology and the witnessed the growing socio-cultural effects of mass-culture. Benjamin did not have the opportunity to witness the burgeoning of technological art in the late twentieth century which was, in a sense, responding to the effects of mass-culture and reflecting life in a technological society.

I posit that contemporary artists often use technologies of reproduction to

resuscitate experience, both collective and personal, in post-modern society. The concept of art as an experience, as a ritual event, is defended by Benjamin. He saw the arts prior to their modern segregation by discipline as synaesthetic events, as *Gesamtkunstwerke*, like Mass, or processions, where the individual subsumed him or herself to the community and was taken away by the diversity of sensorial stimulation. Thus a painting in a church could not be considered as an artwork when it was isolated from the experience, from the sights, sounds and event of the church service for instance.

Benjamin rightly lamented the disappearance of ritual in modern society. I contend, however, that the ritual is not gone; it has just changed its form. The technological art that I examine combines audio-visual experiences with self-reflexive content to resurrect the ritual in another form in our post-modern society. In Waquant's installation the viewer walks into the piece and is enveloped by video projections on two walls and loud speakers dispersed across the floor and suspended from four walls; like at Mass the viewer is confronted with a multiplicity of verbal and visual signals and sensations. And, as I explain later in the thesis, through reproduced sound Waquant's subjectivity becomes apparent within this amalgamation of experiences.

According to Benjamin, experience has diminished with the domination of technology. This has occurred on two levels.

First, the technology of destruction, suffered by Europeans during the First World War, rendered pre-twentieth-century concepts of time and place meaningless. Landmarks that had stood for generations were destroyed instantaneously. Whole villages were razed and with them the identities of their inhabitants. Likewise, the rapid urbanisation at the turn of the century radically

transformed a previously rural geography and the individual's relationship with nature was severed.

Second, with this rationalisation of space, time and communication, experience became structured. Benjamin stressed the random nature of traditional forms of (collective) experience. The storyteller or a church ritual would transfix an audience (sensorially) to the point that its members would not expect a linear progression of information or events. The narrative, or the messages, would enter them in a fashion not structured by language alone. With the regulation of time (clocks, working shifts, schedules) and space (urban grid patterns, public transportation systems) the possibilities for random forms of experience diminished.

I find Benjamin's writings particularly useful to my thesis when he deals with the concept of experience. In this thesis I will argue that the 'temporal' artists I refer to make experience rather than information the object of their art. While Benjamin speculates on the 'pre-technological' aural transmission of experience⁵ I will argue that the artists I write about transmit experience through 'technological' aural forms.

Benjamin's thesis is that with the industrialisation and the rationalisation of society experience is irrevocably transformed both for the individual and the community. Benjamin laments the disappearance of the individual's capacity to receive the world through direct sensory perception, rather than through the mediation of technology. And, according to Benjamin, individuals shared

⁵ This is most evident in 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' where Benjamin refers to the transmission of a story through audio-visual ritual of storytelling. Also in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Benjamin stresses the importance of ritual, as an audio visual experience, as the context for the traditional art object.

collective experiences (rituals and festivals) with other members of the communities to which they belonged. With mass-culture shared experiences (cinema and radio) are no longer specific to a community and therefore disrupt the fragile bonds that once maintained it.

R. Murray Schafer noted how sounds functioned in maintaining a collective memory for a community or a society. He notes that church bells mark the spatial territory of a parish but they also mark the church parishioners as those who recognise the specific chime (consciously or unconsciously) as that of their parish church. Thus, the collective identity of the parishioners could be recalled through hearing their church bells chime. (Schafer 1977, p. 47)

Although I differ with Benjamin's position that 'traditional' culture was somehow more authentic than mass-culture, (Unlike Benjamin, I maintain that the modern subject is still an active participant in constructing culture), I concur with his supposition that what constitutes an individual and a community are experiences, personal and shared.

The experience that Benjamin privileges is *Erfahrung*, or that which is experienced through the senses. What we feel, hear, see, smell constitutes who we are. Our identities are the massed agglomerations of all the sensory stimulants we have retained. Benjamin acknowledges the important role sensorial stimuli play in inducing memories. Memories, triggered by aleatoric sensorial stimulation, are recognised by Benjamin as products of experience rather than intellect. In his essay 'The Storyteller' he explains that the transmission of experience is not a conscious activity but rather, it occurs when the listener's consciousness is overwhelmed by the sensations aroused through the storytelling ritual.

It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand. (Benjamin 1968, p.161)

Identity is constituted not only through the personal experiences of an individual, but also through collective experiences specific to the society in which an individual belongs. Both types of experience can be reconstituted as memory. The storyteller draws from memory to tell an epic story; he or she draws from a multiplicity of experiences of many people. The storyteller remembers all the stories that he has been told and it is his role that his story is committed to the memories of his listeners. Benjamin remarks that stories are remembered unconsciously by the listener who is not even aware of himself listening to a story.

Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. ... The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. (Benjamin 1968, p. 91)

Benjamin claims memories, specifically collective memories, have become the product of mass-media rather than the product of individual and communal experience. But the artists that I write about reclaim personal memory through the use of reproduction technology. It is not the technology *per se* but the way it is used that determines its effects.

All of these artists reuse communication technologies to create personal reflections of their social and 'communicational' environments. With Beuys, it is the mechanical technology of the piano, with Douglas it is a film projection and audio amplification, with Morgan audio transmission, with Viola and Waquant, video playback with multitrack sound. All of these technologies have their

applications as mass-media but these artists subvert them to expose the specificities of the diverse media technologies (Douglas, Beuys) and our physical, psychological and social reception of it (Waquant, Morgan, Viola).

Sound, Experience and Memory

In *À la recherche du temps perdu* Marcel Proust identified smell as the sense most capable of conjuring up past memories. But certainly all non-visual sensations, including sounds, can resuscitate past experiences. Sounds can induce us to recall certain memories. The temporality and lack of presence of sound can stand for the absence of that which is being remembered. Often, when we rehear sounds we are projected back to the moment we first heard them without knowing why. Sound recording technology affects this phenomenon by making it possible to rehear indefinitely the same sound by artificially reproducing it. Sound in a multi-media artwork juxtaposed with the here and now of the visual elements often functions to suggest, or call up, a past experience.

Sounds connote action or movement. When sounds, as words, are written down they become static, and lose the dynamism of spoken language. Words also lose the personal significance of the voice when they are written down. Marshall McLuhan posits the modern world, where the written word equals truth, as a visual world in which cause and effect are discernible and explicable; to remember an event, to render it visible, is to write it down.

According to Benjamin, remembrance is the sum total of what a writer has to remember to write a novel – the events in the life of one person transformed into written words. But, whereas 'remembrances' are constituted by

visual text, sounds evoke 'memories'. The temporal nature of hearing links it with the process of experiencing and of memory. Unlike seeing where an image is dependent primarily upon its spatial attributes rather than its duration, hearing demands that we listen for the period of time it takes for a sound to be heard. And, during that period of listening we are committing the sound to memory.

Walter Benjamin comments on Marcel Proust's distinction between '*mémoire volontaire*' and '*mémoire involontaire*'. The former could be translated as 'recollection' in which a conscious attempt to remember a conscious moment is made. The latter consists of memories that we are unaware of, memories of experiences that we were not consciously aware of at the time of experiencing them. (Benjamin 1968, pp. 162–163)

Involuntary memory is aleatoric; it consists of memories registered at random. Benjamin remarks that the events that triggering the '*mémoire volontaire*' also function randomly. Our '*mémoire involontaire*' is recalled through an uncertain process of sensual stimulation,

... in which the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch." (Benjamin 1968, p. 216)

Benjamin explains that the two types of memory are combined when an individual consciousness is intertwined with a collective consciousness as when the individual experiences a traditional event such as a festival or carnival. Here the individual has a conscious memory (*mémoire volontaire*) of previous carnivals he or she has attended and an unconscious memory (*mémoire involontaire*) of the tradition.

The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals ... kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. ... In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness. (Benjamin 1968, pp. 161–162)

So, according to Benjamin's interpretation of Proust, intellectual stimulation can induce us to recollect conscious individual experiences at the same time as other, involuntary, stimulation induce unconscious and collective memories.

The experience of an audio–visual artwork can not only cause us to remember our own personal conscious past but can also cause us to experience a past that we were previously unaware of and that is shared by others. Artists will use sounds specific to their own experiences along with more culturally present sounds to invoke an identification on the part of the listener while evoking an experience unique to the artist. For example when the viewer experiences Morgan's **Fugue** he or she is incited to recall the modern 'event' of urban demolition – something that all of **Fugue's** audience would have been aware of – through the tremendous sounds of buildings being destroyed. Vancouverites, like residents of any modern city can not remain oblivious to the ubiquitous urban sound of the wrecking ball. The viewer is also induced into remembering the domestic lives that this activity affects as Morgan also added the sound of piano exercises, something that many of us recall hearing in our childhood homes.

The associations that all of these artworks induce are not explicit. Rather, they tend to occur at random during the experience of the work. Indeed, my analyses of each of these works are based on the associations I myself made during my first viewing (and listening) of them. The viewer draws from these

works through assuming a state (as opposed to an act) of hearing. This allows for sensations to be felt and for memories to surface.

Through the assemblage of audio–visual fragments that compose these works the viewer's collective and individual memories are both stimulated. The experience of the work, its duration, allows for the viewer to enter a state of self–forgetfulness which privileges sensorial stimulation and the triggering of involuntary memories. Benjamin saw the technologies of mass–culture to be limiting the viewer's experience. Here, technologies of mass–culture are used to expand the artist's palette, to express aural and temporal phenomena, in order for the viewer to receive the work as experience.

The Voice

The most prevalent form of technologically reproduced sound is the voice; it has been reproduced via telephone, television, and radio systems in magnetic, optical and phonographic forms. In her writings on cinema Mary Ann Doane investigates the subservient role the voice plays when it is accompanied by the cinematic image. Doane finds lurking in the film soundtrack the unconscious invisible (female) subject. Doane explains how sound augments and affects a psychoanalytic response to its accompanying image. In her essay "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space" Doane explains how the film soundtrack functions in creating the film's 'diegetic' space. The space of the 'diegesis' is the virtual space constructed by the film which has both visual and aural traits and includes the space seen on the screen but also virtual space beyond it. This space suspends the audiences belief in the cinematic text. Sound also enhances the 'presence' of the characters depicted

through techniques such as 'voice-off'.

'Voice-off' refers to instances in which we hear the voice of a character who is not visible within the frame. Yet the film establishes, by means of previous shots or other contextual determinants, the character's "presence" in the space of the scene, in the diegesis. (Doane 1980, p. 37)

To stress the importance of voice in cinema, Mary Ann Doane cites the theories of Guy Rosolato concerning the relationships among voice, body, and unconscious. In an essay entitled "*La voix*" Rosolato stresses the importance of voice in analysing the subject's psyche. It is his or her voice, '*la voix*', and not what is said, '*la parole*', that reveals the origin of the individual. This is because voice represents that phase before the separation of body and the senses from language; voice is both a corporal emission and the fundamental element of human communication. "*La voix, parole épurée, vient de l'unique et relie celui qui n'est pas divisé, l'individu à son origine.*" (Rosolato 1969, p. 292)

The separation of voice from body, possible since the invention of the phonograph, has intrigued artists for decades. Douglas refers to, and makes use of, this separation in **Overture**. In a darkened space the viewer witnesses the projected image filmed from the locomotive of a train passing through tunnels in the mountains. No visual human presence is discernible as any movement on the screen is due to a combination of the mechanical workings of the ciné-camera and the locomotive. Douglas pairs this imagery with a voice-over of a man reciting a literary text.⁶ The experience of hearing the aurally resonant voice amplified over two large loudspeakers, despite its lack of

⁶ The text, from Proust, although important for understanding the work would not necessarily be immediately recognisable to the viewer. I refer to this voice as a 'voice-over' which is different from a 'voice-off' as the former does not belong to any of the characters in the film's diegesis.

visual attributes, evoked a phantom corporal presence in the exhibition space. Douglas' installation indicates how nineteenth-century technologies helped us imagine our unconscious selves with the new experiences of mechanical movement, real (with the railway) and illusory (with cinema), and of the disembodied voice (with the phonograph).

Limitations

Because the artists I write about use the technologies of mass-communication for other purposes than communicating with the masses I make few direct references to mass-communication theories based on the sociological construct of the sender and the receiver. However, I do make use of some of Marshall McLuhan's theories of communication because McLuhan looked to artists as the watchdogs of consciousness among the networks of communication and information that make up our society. He asks, "If men were able to be convinced that art is precise advance knowledge of how to cope with the psychic and social consequences of the next technology, would they all become artists?" (McLuhan 1964, p. 66) Although I differ with McLuhan's model of the artist as visionary – the artists I refer tend to look to the past, to older forms of communication technology, to film projectors, gramophones and pianos – I concur with his appreciation of the artist's role in perceiving and reflecting the effects of technology.

McLuhan was more concerned with the experience of communication rather than with the content of the message sent. Although other mass-communication theories accommodate the spatio-temporal variations of different media, as fields of inquiry they privilege how texts are received

demographically and not necessarily individually. Harold Innis categorises communication technologies by their temporal or spatial biases. But Innis is concerned with time and space within a social context. That is to say, a book may have a relatively long temporal effect on a society as it is read over the years whereas a television broadcast has a wide spatial dimension as it is watched by many members of a society simultaneously in many different places. Unlike mass-culture, these works are not diffused over wide communication networks; they have negligible spatial presence. As most of this work is ephemeral, it lasts the duration of the exhibition, its temporal bias, is also limited.

In my attempts to analyse these artworks I also found that many of the recent theories addressing visual and textual representation did not always account for the temporal and sensorial aspects of late twentieth-century art. Semiotics, cinematic psychoanalysis, and post-modern theories of representation are all succinct models for understanding the relationship between who is seeing and what is being seen. However, when the activity shifts from seeing to hearing, a different dynamic is at play, one in which the players' roles are less certain.

A semiotic analysis can deal with spoken text as a syntagm of discrete signifiers, as words. However, when the intonation of the speaker, the mediation of the technology playing back the sound as well as ambient, or background noises, are considered the process of signification recedes. This gives way to a complex process of sensations that constantly mutates signifiatory possibilities.

As for work which uses only ambient sound, Morgan's **Fugue** for example,⁷ semiotics can account for what this work potentially 'means' but not for its direct, and substantial, corporeal effect on its audience.

As for post-modern concepts of representation, Jean Baudrillard's 'screen' or Fredric Jameson's 'depthlessness', these tend to negate any possibility of experience, sensorial or otherwise. All representation is a superficial signifier where meaning changes depending on its context. I contend that the 'presence' of sound contradicts the superficiality of the post-modern signifier. On a proto-linguistic level sound's physical presence is felt by the listener. It is experienced corporeally before it functions as a signifier. Thus, sounds transcend the status of 'floating signifier' through their a priori presence as material phenomena.

Writings on cinema generally regard the medium as primarily a visual one. There have, however, been instances in the history of cinema when the role of sound in film was considered and analysed.⁸ Film theory historically privileged the image over the sound. By 'reading' a film as a series of shots, visual information was considered hierarchically more significant than aural

⁷ Morgan's *Fugue* is discussed at length further on in this thesis. I use it as an example here because its ambient aural presence was quite overwhelming. The sounds heard in *Fugue* consisted mainly of an amplified transmission (in later versions a recording) of a row of houses being demolished.

⁸ Interestingly, these exceptions in film theory in which sound is considered tend to refer back to theories emanating from the advent of the synchronised sound film. In the 1920s and 1930s the role of sound in film had not been fully established and many practitioners of avant-garde film proposed alternate, non-narrative, uses for synchronised sound. Among these are Eisenstein's, Pudovkin's and Alexandrov's 1928 prescription for a contrapuntal use of sound. This, and other articles I refer to later in this thesis were reprinted in the anthology *Film Sound* and in an issue of the *Yale French Studies* on sound in cinema. See bibliography.

information. When sound is taken into account, it is often dialogue that is analysed by film theorists; they consider what is said rather than how it is said.

The tendency to apply psychoanalysis to explain the cinematic experience for the most part maintains the hierarchy of seeing over hearing; psychoanalysis is concerned primarily with the visual, with the unconscious desire to understand the self through looking at others.⁹ However, there have been notable investigations into the unconscious potential of the film soundtrack. Kaja Silverman posits a hierarchy of film sound and image in which the image is privileged over sound and the discursive voice is privileged over other sounds. She sees sound as a marginalised, (female) space within the cinematic text. Mary Ann Doane proposes that this space is read unconsciously. She suggests that the image stands for a conscious reality while sounds posit a less cerebral, more sensorial level of perception. I look to these theories to consider the possibility of sound, particularly non-narrative sound, (ambient effects and room noise), to address the film viewer on an experiential level.

⁹ The aural unconscious has also been addressed in psycho-analytic texts. In his theories on hearing and the voice Rosolato maintains that we perceive our own bodies through hearing and links infantile desire with the hearing of the mother's voice.

II. ARTWORKS

1. Overture – Stan Douglas

Three installations of Stan Douglas were exhibited at the *Kunsthalle Zürich* in the summer of 1994. More a space for temporary exhibitions than a museum, the *Kunsthalle* is located, along with several commercial galleries of contemporary art, in a former industrial sector of Switzerland's largest city. Heading out to this quarter by tram I sensed having left behind the residential and commercial sectors of Zurich as the architectural scale of the buildings and streets expanded to accommodate the passage of freight trains and trucks. The building of the *Kunsthalle* has the spacious feel of an old garage or warehouse that has been whitewashed and cleaned. Its three large galleries are dark, airy and cool. As a solitary visitor I felt lost in such a vast empty place until the sights and sounds of Douglas' projections enveloped me.

In **Overture** the viewer walks into a large oblong room lit solely by the lamp of a single film projector. The image, projected on a screen hung in the narrow end of the room, is a grainy and damaged view of a railway track through the mountains taken from the locomotive of a moving train. The image becomes dark as the train enters a tunnel and washes out as it exits into daylight and crosses a trestle bridge straddling a mountain chasm. After a few minutes this hypnotic black and white film loop repeats itself. An amplified man's voice speaking in French resonates through the space. As one becomes accustomed to the darkness one perceives the large speakers from which this voice emanates attached to the two walls perpendicular to the screen. The simple combination of the single resonant voice and the ethereal projected imagery has an evocative effect as the voice seems to lure one in and out of the

darkness of the tunnel. One of the texts we hear in the installation goes as follows:

... C'est l'instant où le malade qui a été obligé de partir en voyage et a dû coucher dans un hôtel inconnu, réveillé par une crise, se réjouit en apercevant sous la porte une raie de jour. ... Justement il a cru entendre des pas ; les pas se rapprochent, puis s'éloignent. Et la raie de jour qui était sous sa porte a disparu. C'est minuit ; on vient d'éteindre le gaz. (Proust, as quoted in a pamphlet provided by the Kunsthalle Zürich)

Here an invalid confuses night from day and mistakenly believes that the sun has risen although it is only midnight. The spoken texts are all taken from Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. They are specifically chosen passages which speak of the transitory moments between a waking consciousness and the sleeping unconscious. In the preceding passage Proust demonstrates how sleeping and sickness distort our awareness of time passing. Clarity of perception clarifies our memory.

Douglas echoes the transition from night into day, from obscurity to lucidity, with the cinematic image of the train passing through a tunnel. In the dark we lose both our spatial and temporal bearings. Shifts from darkness to light, independent of the time of day, are experienced frequently by train travellers and cinema goers. The dark/light dichotomy explored in *Overture*, a technological phenomena, presupposes the psychological states of consciousness and unconsciousness proposed by psychoanalysis in the beginning of the twentieth century.

If, according to Mary Ann Doane's analysis of film sound, the projected, cinematic image stands for conscious reality, then the soundtrack represents an unconscious, interior reality. The voice over, reading texts from Proust on the

state of transition between waking and sleeping, takes the viewer out of the diegesis of the simple imagery into the realm of unconscious introspection. Thus, due to the ethereal nature of its sound/image combination, **Overture** is not received as an external, active environment but rather as an internal, passive, psychological space, as a dream or a memory.

The significance of the simple elements composing **Overture** becomes particularly compelling when one is aware of their sources.¹⁰ The film is turn of the century archive material from the Edison company of one of the early crossings by train through the mountain passes of British Columbia.

Overture lends itself to an interpretation that addresses the art and technology dichotomy because it touches directly upon what I consider to be the three important factors in this relationship: the history of art and technology, memory and experience, and voice and sound. The effects of the reproduction technologies that Douglas appropriates in **Overture** significantly marked our perception of time. Films and phonographs could preserve the sounds and images of the past which has lead to, since the end of the nineteenth century, poetic and scientific observation of our mnemonic faculties and of experience in general. The disembodied voice (a technological effect) that resonates the darkened space of **Overture** provokes a corporal response to the work that transcends a mere aesthetic or intellectual reading.

¹⁰ Like most institutions of contemporary art the *Kunsthalle Zürich* makes available, at the gallery's entrance, information sheets on the work exhibited.

A History of Art and Technology

In his book *On Video* Roy Armes claims that the history of the technologies of sound recording, television and video all begin in the nineteenth century with the inventions of photography, the phonograph and cinema. Douglas refers back to these founding technologies by using a piece of film from the very early days of cinema from the archives of the company that first marketed sound recording technology (Edison). Indeed, the object of this film is as much the history of cinema, connoted by the grainy quality of the image and the staccato movement, as it is the railway pass.

Parallel to the development of the technologies of image and sound reproduction was the rapid industrialisation of the western world. The imagery in **Overture** is of a railway, the transportation and communication network of industrial and economic expansion. Indeed, the particular railroad projected linked what was to become Douglas' home town (Vancouver) with the then industrialised world (eastern North America and the shipping routes to Europe).

In twentieth-century (modern) art history technology played a key role in the historical avant-garde's campaign to transform the production and reception of art. The historical avant-garde, epitomised by Dadaism, Futurism and Constructivism, saw that art had become an institution unto itself and set out to reintegrate art into every day life and to reassign it a social role.

The industrial revolution and the potential for rapid social change through new forms of transportation, manufacturing and communications fuelled the artistic imagination of the Italian futurists and Russian constructivists. These artists were taken away with the aesthetic, as well as radical social, potential of unlimited building dimensions, and the high speed and power of automobiles

and trains.¹¹

Elsewhere in Europe, Dada artists were using new technologies in their work to undermine the established social and formal limitations of art. Dada artists in Paris were quick to incorporate cinema into their theatre events.¹² In Berlin, artists used techniques of collage and photomontage, of sources taken from print media. These were inspired by and made possible through the new technologies of image and text reproduction.¹³

The avant-garde's embrace of technology was not without its detractors. Walter Benjamin lamented how modern reproduction techniques had radically transformed art's ritual function. Prior to industrialisation, according to Benjamin, an original work of art was permanently installed at a sacred site, or in a place of worship; the simple knowledge of its existence was sufficient for it to perform its ritual function. It was important that to construct an aura around the work of art a certain distance be maintained between the art object and its viewer. The limited visibility of the work was essential to its sacred power.

Benjamin bemoaned the ubiquity of the reproduction; the work of art loses its aura of originality thus losing its ritual function. With technology the role

¹¹ Of the Italians Umberto Boccioni best exemplifies this fascination with his bronze *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) depicting a human form in motion. Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20) for the young Soviet Union displays a utopian concept for the new construction technologies.

¹² In 1924 René Clair realised the film *Entr'acte* to be shown during the intermission of Francis Picabia's and Eric Satie's ballet *Relâche*. (Shattuck 1984, p. 170) Later experiments with cinema were made by Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger and Man Ray among others.

¹³ Notable among the artists working with these media were the members of the Berlin dada Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. The latter used collage as a means to satirise Nazi politics in the 1930s.

of art shifts to one of exhibition; art is made to be seen and mechanical reproduction allows it to be seen by everyone. Also, the camera lens eliminates the distance between the art object and the viewer; its aura is transgressed.

Later Renato Poggioli, echoing Benjamin's critique, found the historical avant-garde, because of their fascination with technology, guilty of "technicism" – of replacing everything, even the spiritual, with the technological. According to Poggioli, this led to the modernist idolation of the machine a priori – not simply an idolation of the effects of the machine but of the machine itself.

Following the primitive's example, the modern man or artist sometimes seems to consider the machine not only as a source of energy but also as the fount of life, an end rather than a means, and thus treats the machine itself as more valuable than anything it produces. (Poggioli 1968, p. 218)

With **Overture** Douglas avoids the aesthetic of technicism as the film projection blatantly reveals the grainy defects of technological reproduction. Douglas' use of a film loop of limited imagery leads us to look for meaning not in the film but in its apparatus. In the context of this exhibition, cinema is an historic technology that reflects the culture and ideology of its specific history. The apparatus and cinematic 'noise' presented by **Overture** lead us to consider the history of cinema and its lost avant-garde potential (although artists such as Douglas may be seen to be attempting to recover an avant-garde film practice).

Poggioli stressed the specificity of the avant-garde notion of an *art d'exception*, or a culture that operates outside of, or in opposition to, a dominant culture is a relatively recent phenomenon; "the term and concept of avant-garde art reach no further back in time than the last quarter of the past

century." (Poggioli 1968, p.13)¹⁴ Despite its implicit corporate and state approval in the form of financial donations and funding contemporary art remains a marginalised phenomenon within today's mass-culture. I would postulate that the exhibition of Douglas' works in the *Kunsthalle Zürich* which, along with other galleries of contemporary art, is located on the industrial fringe of this wealthy city constitutes a late twentieth century version of an *art d'exception*.

Ironically the historical avant-garde failed in its attempts to transform society through art and art through technology. Ultimately it was the culture industry that succeeded, with the use of technology, where the avant-garde failed, and transformed everyday life. The railway and cinema symbolise the culture industry in **Overture** which here the artist recuperates to form a new text which along with the text of Proust re-examines the (side) effects of this industry.

What was particularly telling in the Zurich exhibition of **Overture** was that the process of recuperation evident in the artwork was echoed by its exhibition site. The *Kunsthalle* is located far from the city's main art museum (the *Kunsthhaus*) and from its commercial arteries and pedestrian zones. It is a renovated commercial building in an industrial sector going through economic transformation. The conditions surrounding the presentation and cultural relevance of contemporary artworks have not been fundamentally bettered

¹⁴ Poggioli posits that an avant-garde can only exist in a liberal democratic society and within a capitalist economy. Poggioli goes on to suggest that as long as we live in such a society the avant-garde will remain. Democratic societies need oppositional cultures to survive in order to claim a legitimate democracy; "the avant-garde is not only the direct expression of a negative cultural relation, but is also the expression of the human and social condition that created this schism in the cultural order." (Poggioli 1968, p. 118)

since the beginning of this century. The marginalised sites of contemporary art are hidden testaments to the failure of the historical avant-garde to reintegrate art into society. Still relegated to the peripheries of modern society, art is found in museums and galleries while mass entertainment and sports occupy the dominant cultural sites of stadia, television and consumer recordings. Experimental art or *art actuel* (that which is neither a marketable commodity nor worthy of historical attention) is even more marginalised. The location of the *Kunsthalle*, a centre which promotes and exhibits 'new' art exemplifies this marginalisation.

Sound and Voice

Douglas succeeds in invoking a corporal response to his piece by placing his viewer in the dark and subsequently playing back the recording of a loud, resonant voice. The characteristics of the sound are achieved through a combination of the particularities of the speaker's voice, the quality of its recording, the presence of its electronic amplification and the space it occupies acoustically. The result is a sound that has a presence deeper and more vital than the grainy projected images. Also, we identify with the human voice more rapidly than we do with an image of a landscape devoid of human presence. Thus, Douglas uses technology to lead us sensorially into a state of corporal awareness. But, it is the sound that ultimately allows us to enter this space; as sound bypasses certain intellectual faculties, hearing undermines our position

of critical distance.¹⁵

What Douglas lets us hear in **Overture** is a single voice. The voice stands as a signature for the person (undoubtedly an actor) speaking. We can assume certain things about the speaker through his voice alone; we have an idea as to his nationality, approximate age, and we can hazard a guess as to his class and his social background. In his essay 'The Grain of the Voice' Roland Barthes claims that the voice also carries pre-linguistic information about the speaker, that the speaker's physical body is communicated through the voice. Thus, Barthes postulates, through hearing another's voice a direct communication is made between two bodies.

Guy Rosolato, echoing Barthes, stressed the importance of voice in analysing the subject's psyche. It is his or her voice, "*la voix*", and not what is said, "*la parole*", that reveals the origin of the individual. This is because voice recalls that phase before the separation of body and the senses from language; voice is both a corporal emission and the fundamental element of human communication. (Rosolato 1969, p. 292)

The effect of the voice in **Overture** is not negligible. If we accept the postulations of Barthes and Rosolato not only do we sense a certain vulnerability that hearing entails but we are also made aware of the presence of a stranger's body.¹⁶

¹⁵ Rosolato recognises hearing as a passive sense. We can hear without being in active pursuit of sensation. Unlike seeing, where we consciously look for things, hearing is performed unconsciously; sounds find us.

¹⁶ I realise that this could be true anytime we hear a stranger's voice. I point out the specificities of the voice in an attempt to identify the locus of the, partially corporal, effect that an installation such as **Overture** has on its viewers.

But there is also a certain peculiarity to a voice that has been technologically transmitted. There is a paradoxical relationship between a recorded voice and its body. While we hear the fluctuations in the intonation of the voice we imagine the accompanying corporal gestures. In an essay entitled 'Schizophonia' R. Murray Schafer notes that the psychological attributes of sounds derive from the physiological efforts required to make them.

... there has always been a correspondence between the physiological activity of producing a sound and the psychological qualities we attribute to it. There is a big energy output in a loud sound, a tensing in a high sound, a relaxing in a loud sound and so forth. (Schafer 1969, p. 47)

However, when the sound is reproduced technologically the corporal activity of the sound producer disappears and the listener is left with a psychological sensation without a body as its source. Schafer called this unnerving effect 'schizophonia'.

This dissociation I call schizophonia, and if I use a word close in sound to schizophrenia it is because I want very much to suggest to you the same sense of aberration and drama that this word evokes ... (Schafer 1969, p. 43)

Thus, the resonant voice heard in **Overture** affects us corporeally, as it stands for (an absent) human presence and psychologically, as it has been technologically severed from the physiological source of that presence. And, both these effects are felt prior to any semantic recognition of the spoken text.

Experience and Memory

The moving image filmed from a locomotive in **Overture** evokes a sensation of continuity. The viewer does not perceive him or herself to be static but in a constant state of recurrent transition from daylight to the darkness of the tunnel. We are made aware of the passage through time as we imagine the scenery of the present disappearing behind us in the past.

The development of the moving image through cinematic technology was symptomatic with discussions surrounding the nature of time and movement in general. According to Henri Bergson, to understand reality it must be entered into or experienced. Reality is not composed of a series of instants, one being followed by the next, but rather reality is the action of transition itself, the continuous flux of being. (Bergson 1938, p. 211)

The effect that the audio-visual elements have on the viewer's senses while he or she experiences **Overture** leads to a psychological state which facilitates the inducement of involuntary memories. We know from the quality of the image that the film footage of the railroad is from the past; we know we are watching images that probably predate us. The lack of sound (another indicator of the film's date) and the washed out and grainy look of the projection give it a phantom like presence. It is evident what we are watching but the details are imperceptible. Although we are watching in the conscious present, an image of the unconscious past, a memory, is evoked.

One of the specificities of an audio visual installation like **Overture** is that it must be experienced, physically and temporally, by its viewer. He or she walks into a large dark space; the darkness depriving the viewer of any sensorial stimulation other than that provided by the artist. The impact of the

projected image is accentuated as it is also the sole light source in the space. The amplified voice is loud and acoustically resonant; the viewer physically senses the vibrations coming from the speakers.

Walter Benjamin states that the key to triggering what Proust referred to as *mémoire involontaire*, memories that we are unaware of, memories of experiences that we were not consciously aware of at the time of experiencing them, is through sensual stimulation. (Benjamin 1968, p. 216) **Overture** evokes a psychological state not through the specificity of its images (archival film) and sounds (spoken quotations from a text) but through their sensorial presence. The darkness, the flickering image, and the resonant deep voice incite in the viewer memories of sleeping, waking and dreaming.

Overture functions on an intellectual and aesthetic level, but also on an sensorial one. It is a multi-faceted work experienced as an audio-visual whole. The crux of the work lies not in the projected imagery nor in the spoken text but in the evocative dynamic created between the sound and the image.

2. *Plight* and *Stummes Grammophon* - Works by Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys installation **Plight** (1984) encloses the viewer in a space lined in vertical grey felt tubes. To enter, one must pass through a low opening cut from the bottom of several tubes. Upon entering the space the dampened acoustics become immediately apparent to the viewer. The felt muffles any sonic resonance; it as if one had entered an anechoic chamber. Inside the space there is a grand piano, on top of which lies a blank chalkboard, and on top of that a thermometer. Beyond the space housing the piano, through another low opening in the felt tubes, lies another 'felt' space, this one empty.

Sound, more specifically music, is evoked in this installation although all of its elements are silent. Reiner Speck remarks on how music pervades Beuys' works despite their silence.

Beuys' thinking about music always finds a way into his work whenever acoustical processes are to be considered within the complex of a sculptural perception: ... Conveyors of music and sound lie dormant between stacked layers of sound-absorbing felt as in a sarcophagus. (Reiner Speck as quoted in Block & Glasmeier 1989, p. 99)

The enigma of **Plight** is 'experienced' aurally by the viewer as it is read intellectually. The viewer is drawn immediately to the piano and anticipate hearing its refined tones. But, its keyboard is closed and it is silent. Instead of hearing music our hearing is impeded by the absorbent felt. Alone in the chamber the viewer literally hears nothing.

The aural lack experienced by the viewer is compounded symbolically by the empty chalkboard. The white partitions permanently etched into it are void of

chalk marks.¹⁷ It is as if the absent composer was suffering eternal writer's block. The thermometer, as a measure of corporeal well-being, could suggest a cause for this symptom. But, the thermometer is also the only element that perceptibly changes in this otherwise very still space. It is in a state of flux, its mercury expanding and contracting in response to environmental conditions. It gives the space a temporal presence.

The thermometer also suggests preservation. Thermometers monitor the temperature in museums and archives in order to best preserve their contents. Felt has the property of protecting its contents.¹⁸ There is a suggestion that the contents of the chamber in **Plight**, which may symbolise artistic creation, are being preserved or even recuperated. The silent piano lies in waiting for its player. The viewer senses an air of anticipation in **Plight**, that the concert could resume at any moment. The still air in the felt-lined chamber suggests that the space itself were holding its breath.

The Avant-garde

In the 1960s and 1970s Joseph Beuys played an important role in resuscitating the avant-garde with actions and performances which called into question the social role of the artist. Beuys was associated with the Fluxus movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This loose international grouping of artists

¹⁷ The chalkboard also refers to Beuys' own creative process as several of his performances and installations featured didactic and cryptic diagrams and messages scrawled by the artist in chalk on classroom blackboards. These include *Richtkrafte* (1977) and *Das Kapital Raum* (1970–1977).

¹⁸ The recurrent use of felt and fat in Beuys' work is explained by the artist as an autobiographic reference to the recuperative materials used by the Tartars who rescued him, when as a member of the *Luftwaffe* he was shot down over the Soviet Union in the second world war.

sought to revive certain avant-garde notions of interdisciplinarity and the social function of art.¹⁹

Beuys' art practice could be considered *art d'exception*. His work functions in the margins of the predominant culture. We can also identify an attitude of negation in the art of Joseph Beuys. Beuys negates mass-culture with his ritualistic actions and iconic objects. True to Poggioli's concept of the avant-garde Beuys art work laments the rationalisation of production and the demise of the artisan. There is a romantic spirit to Beuys' art;²⁰ at first glance, his art seems to function primarily as an autobiographical form of self-expression.

Further investigation of his work, however, demonstrates that Beuys transcends individual expression and responds to the criteria established by the Frankfurt School and reiterated by Peter Bürger that avant-garde art have a social function.

In his exhibitions Beuys would unpretentiously include found objects that had charged socio-cultural significance, a telephone, a chair, a gramophone

¹⁹ Beuys was not officially member of this international movement but he did perform with several member artists including Wolf Vostell in 1964 and invited the group to the Düsseldorf Academy, where he taught, for a "Festum Fluxorum Fluxus." (Temkin 1994, p. 15) John F. Moffitt, in his book *Occultism in Avant-Garde: The Case of Joseph Beuys* tries to explain the very loose conglomeration of artists that have participated in the Fluxus movement over the years.

... Fluxus is a very difficult phenomenon to analyse according to specific principles. It is far easier to record its specific phenomena than it is to determine its overriding programmatic sense. In effect, its philosophy was heterogeneous, varying according to the lights of each of its participating members. Moreover, its membership was anything but constant. (Moffitt 1988, p. 46)

²⁰ Poggioli locates the roots of modernism, and of the avant-garde, in romanticism. According to the Romantics of the early nineteenth-century, art connotes the inner nature of the individual and, subsequently is without specific meaning. Art, like nature, is open to the interpretation of the viewer. This concept of art demands that art be autonomous of society.

player, a grand piano. If Beuys' actions were²¹ an attempt at recuperating the social sphere with aesthetic remedies his sculptures and installations continually brought the social into the realm of the aesthetic.

Art and Technology

Beuys' use of technology in his work separates him, chronologically and ideologically, from the historical avant-garde. The Italian futurists were seduced by the speed and power that the modern technology represented; the Dadaists saw the potential for mass dissemination of art through techniques of mass reproduction. Beuys' references to technology are much more quotidian. His work reflects a culture that has been shaped by modern technology, a postwar society that is inherently technological. Thus, technological apparatus are combined with natural or pre-technological elements in Beuys' work. In his search for found objects Beuys could not overlook the redundant technological objects so often discarded by modern consumers.

Beuys produced a number of works which refer specifically to sound and to sound reproduction. Concepts of transmission and inscription (recording) are recurring motifs in Beuys' work. Although, he occasionally used sound reproduction technologies to produce multiple editions of recordings of concerts or performances, it is Beuys' 'non-aural' sound objects that I wish to address to demonstrate the artist's concern with aural communication.

²¹ In his performances (*Aktionen*), in his life (*Lebenslauf*) Beuys adopted a persona that was both an autobiographical representation of himself and a universal everyman. He staged actions outside of the art institutions, sweeping the debris of a May day parade or planting 7000 oaks around the city of Kassel. His persona was Beuys' medium for lamenting the human condition, both social and spiritual, in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Beuys' sculptures and objects would often refer to the technological processes of sound reproduction and compare them to natural processes. An example of this would be his *Stummes Grammophon* (1961, Dumb or Silent Gramophone). This small object (24 x 31.5 x 23 cm) consists of a cardboard box with a gramophone record lying on it. An opaque piece of photographic film is glued to the record, hiding its label. Two corners of the film are marked in oil paint with small brown crosses, (A Beuys trademark). On top of the box, attached to a wooden base, is a wire extending over the record with a bone attached to it. With this assemblage that suggests a gramophone player Beuys has replaced the tone arm with an organic element.²²

Theodor Adorno in 'The Form of the Record' laments the invention of the gramophone as the ultimate manifestation of an age when technological potential showed itself to far exceed human capability. "It originated as perhaps the first art-technological invention in an epoch which had already cynically avowed to the superiority of things over man..." (Adorno 1989, p. 49) With *Stummes Grammophon* and other similar works, Beuys reinscribes the human element into Adorno's technocentric gramophone and effectively reverses the technicism that Poggioli accused the avant-garde of promoting.

Without going as far as to define the spiritual as technological, Beuys suggests that our technological apparatuses echo some sort of

²² Reiner Speck in his essay '*Beuys und Musik*' explains how Beuys uses gramophone records less as sound carriers than as object holders.

... Further the phonograph records used in Beuys' work are not only conveyors of sound, but more often carriers of objects when he intends to create a sculpture with the assistance of "antimusic": Phonograph with skeletal parts or metal pieces affixed to them. In another work, called "Ocean Symphony", a small lighthouse is mounted upon a recording of Carmen. (Speck, p. 99)

pre-technological understanding of experience and sensation; **Stummes Grammophon** evokes the notion that our bones could record and amplify sounds before the gramophone was invented. This leads to the extrapolation that the concept of the gramophone predates, and anticipates, its invention.

Stummes Grammophon uses the gramophone record as an icon for the technological process of storing and retrieving sounds. Adorno remarks on how phonography has transformed music from a human activity into a text inscribed on a material object. In the form of a record, a fleeting aural experience becomes a permanent inscription.

... the possibility that music without ever having been sounded out, can be >depicted<; thus music has at the same time a still more inhuman materialisation, and still more mysteriously approaches closer to written and verbal characteristics. (Adorno 1989, p. 50)

Adorno likens sound recording to photography calling gramophone records "nothing more than exactly acoustical photographs which," referring to 'Nipper' who is depicted listening to a gramophone horn on the HMV record labels, "the dog so happily recognises again." (Adorno 1989, p. 49) Adorno points out that a trait shared by photography and phonography is their reproducibility allowing for multiple copies of a recorded event. He notes that *Platte*, used in German for both a gramophone record (*Schallplatte*) and a photographic plate, denotes a two-dimensional reproduction of experience. "It signifies a two-dimensional model of a reality which can be arbitrarily multiplied, shifted about according to laws of space and time, and then bartered in the market place." (Adorno 1989, p. 49)

With **Stummes Grammophon**, Beuys refers to photography, a visual system of technological memory, by laying a photographic transparency upon

the gramophone record, itself representing an aural system of technological memory. Against the black surface of the disc the image is not legible nor is the label of the disk, which is masked by the film, visible. Thus, the recorded experiences are rendered inaccessible and both the disc and the film are reduced to symbolic objects. Like the bone that can only suggest the body it once supported, the film and the disc can only hint at the experiences inscribed on them.

Beuys' work challenges Benjamin's thesis that mechanically reproduced art cannot function ritually because the artist's hand is not implicated in the production of the art. Because Beuys makes use of mass produced objects, records, films, etc., the artist's hand is absent from much of the artwork. But Beuys appropriates these objects and makes them his own by selecting them and by altering them or painting on them; mass produced images and forms are transformed into raw material, like clay or wood, for the artist to sculpt or mould to produce something that is his own but that does not betray its origins.

Sound

What is most apparent in *Stummes Grammophon* and other of Beuys' objects which refer to sound reproduction is their silence, their incapacity to produce sound. Not only is the bone tone arm non-functional, the film laid across the disk of *Stummes Grammophon* obstructs access to its grooves.

Thus in many of his objects there is a bridge between the potential visual and auditory interpretations [Noiseless Blackboard Eraser, Silence, (*Das Schweigen*), Bone Gramophone (*Grammophon aus Knochen*), Tape in Stacked Felt (*Tonband in Filzstapel*)]: one hears through careful observation, one sees through attentive listening. Latent sound is the observer's sculpture. (Reiner Speck p. 99)

With *Das Schweigen* (1973, The Silence) Beuys has coated the five film reels of the Ingmar Bergman film 'The Silence', in zinc. Presented with their box, the film is transformed from a transitory experience into a collection of heavy objects.

Erdtelefon (1968, Earth Telephone) is a telephone connected to a wooden board on which a piece of earth is laying. Here, the silent telephone evokes a technological inability to communicate with nature. In *Telephon S-3* (1974), a tin can telephone with trade mark brown cross painted on one of the tins, an emphasis is placed on a non-technological communication. Following Beuys' theme of rescue and recuperation the tin can telephone can be interpreted as an emergency communication apparatus, a telephone that will function when technological communication cannot.

Sonnenscheibe (1973, Sun Disc, edition of 77) is a copper and nickel master disc for the Beuys and Henning Christiansen record of *Schottische Symphonie. Requiem of Art*.²³ The disc is protected between two pieces of felt (a material which dampens sound) in a cardboard box. Stamped on the felt is Beuys' name and a brown cross. On the cover of the box is the label for technical data; it is marked *Mutter* (mother or master). Here Beuys has

²³ Beuys produced multiple objects, images and recordings derived from or referring to his actions. These mechanically reproduced artworks served to disseminate the artist's ideas beyond the audience in attendance at the event.

transformed an unplayable record into a near spiritual icon; the disc stands for the mother as well as for the sun (it is golden in colour). It has also supplanted the event as the source of a (musical) experience. With *Sonnenschelbe*, Beuys has transformed an musical experience into a visual and tactile object.²⁴

Memory and Experience

I have referred to the work of Joseph Beuys to demonstrate how sculptural objects can refer to hearing and communication without making sound themselves. Beuys' objects critique technological mediation without being 'media art' forms; they are not films to be projected nor records to be played. They address the potential for sound or for experience inherent in modern material objects, in records, in photographs, in films, and in modern technological apparatuses, in telephones, in gramophone players and in cameras. As recorders and carriers of experience, these technologies and their objects condense time and function as manifestations of memory and of the mnemonic process itself.

A very important aspect of Beuys' work is its transitoriness, its flux. We are made aware of decomposition (the tone-arm bone, the earth telephone), of processes of manufacturing and human reproduction (the master disc/mother) and of atmospheric as well as corporal fluctuations (the thermometer). Beuys chose his elements for their temporal potential as much as for their material presence. There is a certain arrested energy in a grand piano waiting to

²⁴ Gramophone records represented for Adorno the technological capability to transform musical time as a transitory event into an object upon which music, and time, may be stored. "It is, as an artistic perishable product, the first presentation of music to be manifested as a thing." (Adorno 1989, p. 49)

belayed.

The temporal aspect of Beuys work reflects Bergson's concept of '*la durée intérieure*', as an ongoing passage through the present where the individual's experiences of the past accumulate inside him or her as memories. The past returns, in the form of memories, to affect the individual's experience of the present.

With works like **Plight** the past is presented to us as a collection of objects, as someone else's memories.²⁵ These objects have been accumulated like residue from the past. Each of them connotes a specific event or occurrence that had happened yet they remain static and silent. Beuys' objects, found and constructed, evoke the past through their mute presence. Like memories, their meanings are fragmented; we can only guess at their complete significance.

As they are large enough to enter into,²⁶ we are not only overwhelmed by the dimensions of Beuys' installations but by other sensations they emit. Beuys often used organic and animal substances such as fat, olive oil, earth and straw and these works would have an olfactory effect the viewer. And, as demonstrated in **Plight**, the sound absorbing properties of felt (a material often used by Beuys) also affected the way a work was perceived aurally.

Bergson links mnemonic recall to the senses. He stipulates that what stimulates memory and what are remembered are pre-linguistic sensations. He

²⁵ Another example of Beuys' crystallised remnants or memories would be his vitrines (*Arbeiten in Vitrinen*). Executed between 1949 and 1983 these glass museum cases contain and preserve objects from his public actions and his life work (*Lebenslauf*).

²⁶ In '*Introduction à la métaphysique*' Bergson claims that reality cannot be understood via analysis of its component parts or of points of view of its surface; to understand reality it must be entered into or experienced.

maintains that memory functions, not with images or signifiers, but with direct sensorial stimulation.²⁷ The direct 'experience' that Beuys work provokes occurs prior to an intellectual level. Even if we smell or hear nothing, organic material, musical instruments and audio apparatus provoke our senses to respond in anticipation of stimulation. Thus, the work could be said to have a charged presence. It suggests experience, through a pregnant state of anticipation of sensorial activity.

Although the works that I have chosen do not actually emit sounds, they nevertheless embody aural qualities. These works by Beuys are repositories of experience; the sensations they contain exist in the artist's (and in the viewer's) imagination. The viewer anticipates music when he or she sees a piano or a gramophone disc; there are references in Beuys objects to telecommunications.

Beuys' work seems to privilege experience without actually providing an experience. In this sense the deathly still **Plight** or the mute **Stummes Grammophon** could be intended as silent witnesses of the disappearance of experience in contemporary society.

²⁷ According to Benjamin, intellectual stimulation can induce us to recollect conscious individual experiences while involuntary, or sensorial, stimulation induce unconscious and collective memories. This interpretation of mnemonic function could explain Beuys' use of synaesthetic materials in his work to awaken a social consciousness in his audience.

3. Fugue – Joey Morgan

Vancouver artist Joey Morgan's work deals with how perception and memory operate and how they tend to fragment what is being perceived or remembered. Her art often takes the form of a multi-media installation combining photography, collage, sculptural elements and found objects with a recorded (or live) sound track. A personal history is inferred through the objects and sounds in her work but it is never explicit. Her elements reflect the aleatoric functions of memory and perception. Morgan presents her audience with a composition of parts which, when pieced together, are like fragments referring to subjective interpretations of events or experiences.

In the last week of February 1984 Morgan exhibited a project called **Fugue** in Vancouver. For this piece Morgan placed microphones in two houses on Pacific Street that were to be demolished and, during the demolition of the houses, transmitted the live sound to an abandoned warehouse on Hamilton Street where it functioned as an element in the installation Morgan had constructed there. The first version of this piece, which Morgan called the "Statement/Prelude," took place during the six hours it took to demolish the houses. The next day a recording of the houses being destroyed was played back into the exhibition space. Along with the other elements of the installation,

the recording was presented as "Statement/Reprise," the second version of the piece.²⁸

Due to its ephemeral nature, (its original incarnation only lasted six hours), **Fugue** was never seen by most members of the Canadian artistic community. However, documentation and word of mouth has kept the memory of **Fugue** alive as a seminal work; it has gained a reputation among Canadian contemporary artists for its immediacy and effect. My accounts of it all come from secondary sources as I never witnessed the piece myself.

Ann Rosenberg attended "Statement/Reprise" during which Morgan "...presented the edited tape of the bulldozing (the last half hour) along with two other tapes of similar durations..." (Rosenberg 1984, p. 31) and she describes the objects that Morgan chose or constructed to accompany the sound.

From the perspective of the derelict waiting room chair that Morgan set central to but removed from the low table that held the sculpture, one could scarcely see the house numbers embedded in wax that lay on the bottom of each tray. as teasingly as hanks of hair and shards of bone beckon from behind the smoked glass doors of reliquaries. (Rosenberg 1984, p. 31)

The numbers, which were recuperated from the houses on Pacific Street by Morgan, were embedded in wax, placed within wire cages and arranged on a work table. Morgan played back the sound of the houses' destruction over

²⁸ Ann Morrison quotes from an interview with Morgan her description of the project.

The 'Fugue' project was a two-part recital of direct and circumstantial evidence. The first part, the 'Statement/Prelude,' established the correspondence between the two sides by collecting audio data from 1015-1053 Pacific Street and transferring it live to the installation at 1230 Hamilton Street. The second part, the 'Statement/Reprise,' incorporated an excerpt of this data with two other levels of prerecorded sound into a sculptural model installation and was presented at 1230 Hamilton as a series of 40 minute recitals. (Morrison 1984, p. 2)

loudspeakers. A very quiet recording of Hammon exercises being played on a piano was played over tiny speakers suspended inside the cages, evoking the possible activities of past inhabitants of the houses.

Also mixed in to the soundtrack, but barely perceptible over the demolition noise, was a recording of a piano being destroyed. Ann Morrison describes this sound in the catalogue for "Fugue StateMent" as, "...a jerked sporadic series of whacks and grinds, of stretched wires twanging as the sounding board was forcibly separated from strings and hammers." (Morrison 1984, p. 4) Memories of past domestic activities, evoked by the piano exercises, were being demolished symbolically as the instrument of these musical activities was suffering a dissonant destruction.

Sound

Morgan explores the gamut of possibilities for recorded sounds from their potential to overwhelm, as with the demolition sounds, to their evocation of intimacy. With **Fugue** Morgan effectively reconstructed the force of the semi-public event of houses' destruction through the use of its sound. But, she also evoked the personal histories of these houses with intimate aural fragments. Ann Morrison noted that the subsidiary soundtracks, the piano exercise and the piano destruction, heard during "Statement/Reprise" reveal that Morgan was aware of the inevitable human connotations of a house being destroyed.

The layers of piano, piano destruction and house destruction are connected in metaphor as well as in sound. Morgan saw the two-storey wooden houses as shelter on a human scale, built by hand out of warm, organic material. Unpretentious homes, they could be associated in nostalgia with families with children – children who perhaps would have practised piano lessons on Saturday mornings as part of the patterning of middle-class culture. (Morrison 1984, p. 4)

Here a random sound that might have once emanated from one of the houses functions as an association for the past inhabitants and their activities in the demolished houses. It evokes personal memories of domestic life.²⁹

The delicacy of the piano exercises and the implicit fragility of the domestic experiences it evokes is in sharp contrast to the dominant demolition sounds. Morgan rendered the power of bulldozers (technology) knocking down once permanent structures as a deafening sonic resonance. She made use of high wattage amplification and large public address speakers to reproduce the sheer physical presence of the original sounds.

Morgan's choice to use the sound of a house being torn down was not random. Vancouver in the 1980s was a growing city going through rapid urban transformation. The drone of construction was never far from the ears of its residents and the crash of buildings being demolished was not an uncommon sound.

Schafer refers to 'archetypal sounds' as sounds that become so entrenched in a society that their meaning is understood almost instinctively. Perhaps the sounds of urban demolition are archetypal to the twentieth century

²⁹ So do some of the recordings she has used in other installations. In other works Morgan uses technologies of sound reproduction that are specific to interpersonal use, the telephone, the answering machine, etc.

city; these noises constitute part of the soundtrack of an urban dweller's life in the late twentieth century, identity epitomised by the crash of the wrecking ball. But, if the sound of machinery constitutes urban identity, what is left of a non-technological personal experience?

Experience and Memory

By displacing the sound of the demolition, Morgan transforms it. The listener no longer hears a house being torn down, only the sound of it. The sound has no physical effect; it is reduced to being the signifier without the signified. In a review of *Fugue*, Arthur Perry 1986, posits that it was the mediated live sound of the demolition, and not the demolition itself that was the implied content of "Statement/Prelude." He suggests that by transmitting the sound of the demolition to the 'exhibition site' of the abandoned warehouse, "...the house's demolition was 'information' which was re-established where it did not belong..." (Perry 1986, p. 14) Thus, what engaged and potentially traumatised the audience was the experience of listening to an identifiably threatening live sound without the possibility of discerning any other indication of its object.³⁰ The audience was subsequently made aware of the spatial dislocation between the sound, its source and themselves.

If the live sound in "Statement/Prelude" displaced the audience in space

³⁰ Christian Metz, in writing about the function of sound in the cinema, provides a key as to why sounds which are isolated from their source can be perceptually disturbing. He claims that as sounds are usually identified by their source they lack the potential to stand as objects on their own. 'To understand' a perceptual event is not to describe it exhaustively but to be able to classify and categorise it: to designate the object of which it is an example. Therefore, sounds are more often classified according to the objects which transmit them than by their own characteristics. (Metz 1985, p. 156)

– they were listening and looking at simultaneous yet spatially separate events
– then "Statement/Reprise" displaces the audience in time. They attend and view an exhibition in the present tense while listening to a sound that was not only recorded in the past but that signifies the moment of transformation of an object from its past state as a house to rubble, the state it has attained when "Statement/Reprise" is performed. Perry notes that the "event" of the demolition was part of the piece "Statement/Prelude". He points out that it is the *recording* of the demolition that replaces the event in "Statement/Reprise." (Perry 1986, p. 14) Thus the displacement in time, through sound recording, is as significant as the displacement in space, through sound transmission, was.

What Morgan accomplished with her 'fugue in two parts' was to reconstruct the memory of a memory. If "Statement/Prelude" remembers the houses while they are being destroyed then "Statement/Reprise" remembers their destruction. Perry recognises this preoccupation with how memory works as an ongoing concern of Morgan's and he quotes her in referring to this phenomenon in her work as, "...continuing elements that ... fold back on themselves." (Perry 1986, p. 14) He suggests that Morgan, rather than laying claim to the modernist pretensions of innovation and development, looks to the past and how, "...we involuntarily remember things past." (Perry 1986, p. 14) Perry refers to the moments when, evoked by a sensation such as a familiar smell or sound, fragments of our past come back to us as "intermittences."³¹

If we consider Morgan's techniques for triggering involuntary memory

³¹ Marcel Proust wrote, "Just like the future, it is not all at once but grain by grain that one tastes the past." (Proust as quoted by Perry 1986, p. 15) Perry's concept of "intermittences" is informed by the writings of Proust and his concept of "déflagration" in which the past flares up, "...out of memory via the most insignificant nudge." (Perry 1986, p. 15)

recall or "intermittences" it becomes apparent that sound is used as the dominant sensation for invoking this phenomenon. Whether it be the dislocating effect of the live sound of a house being demolished in "Statement/Prelude" or the recording of piano exercises evoking childhood and the home in "Statement/Reprise," it is the ephemeral, non-material quality of aural information that functions as an effective conduit for memory. Perry refers to those elements in Morgan's installations that provoke memories as "agents of recall," which, according to Perry, "...were specifically oriented to coenesthesia, or the organic sensation of existence." (Perry 1986, p. 16) Morgan also recognises that sounds can allow for a more sensual, intuitive understanding of things. "Like the sense of smell, it's a more primary and more effective medium for subjective associations." (Morgan 1986 p. 118)

Morgan work invokes Bergson's thesis that the operation of memory is governed by a combination of chance and sensorial stimulation.³² In this way, hearing an unexpected yet familiar sound, scales played on a piano for instance, can lead us to a forgotten moment of our past that we unconsciously associate with that sound.

Morgan uses fragmented imagery and sounds in her work that can function as elements to induce mnemonic recall. The house numbers are a random visual reference to the no longer existent abodes. These fragments, despite having been consciously selected by Morgan, suggest indeterminate moments or found objects; they suggest memories that are the result of chance

³² According to Bergson, memory is induced by chance operating in one of two ways; either our senses trigger memories at specific yet unpredictable moments, or specific sensations, which we cannot predict, trigger memories. In both cases mnemonic recall is triggered through the senses.

occurrences.³³

It is the random, non-linear, quality of Morgan's work that make it so evocative. With sounds isolated from their sources, the viewer is at once sensorially stimulated and intellectually confused; the viewer is put in a state of aural dislocation. Thus, through sound technology, Morgan displaces her viewers' perspective. Other elements in her work are fragments, found objects and sounds. They do not combine to form a discrete text but rather they suggest a more fluid interpretation of the houses' histories, one which is in flux.

The Effects of Modernism and Technology

Fugue critiques the destructive tendencies of modernism by bearing immediate aural witness to a blatant act of urban demolition. Here technological sound is used to recall our own individual presence as a viewer, through awareness of our own sense of dislocation in hearing the loud, physical, yet invisible, sound. Morgan subtly hints, through other, quieter sounds, at the individual lives forgotten during this large-scale urban transformation. The (sound) recordings of the piano exercises evoke human presence, dislocated in time.

The civic numbers in **Fugue** functioned as mementoes or relics of the displaced and destroyed houses. The aural recording of their destruction is also a memento, or memory of their lost presence. The piano scales refer to possible past inhabitants of the dwellings. One of the effects of rapid urban transformation is that the individual gets left behind. The growing city is a

³³ Bergson also maintains that we can really only re-experience the past if we let it emerge by itself, by chance, from our unconscious.

modern symptom. The memories of a handful of lives in a row of houses provides no significant road block to the juggernaut of 'progress'. Morgan recognises this. She does not try to halt the houses' destruction, rather, she draws our attention to it, to its significance.

Morgan makes us aware of the subject in her work by using technology to stimulate subjective experience. In her installation we hear the disturbing sounds of houses being demolished yet we are removed from the direct effects of these sounds. Although the sound of the houses' demolition has been technologically processed we do not experience a technological reproduction that is recognisable to us. We are aware of our dislocation, of our own subjectivity vis-à-vis the event of destruction.³⁴ By technologically removing the sound from its source, by taking it out of context, Morgan has created a new experience that is neither the event of the demolition nor simply that event mediated.

Morgan has appropriated the 'modern' event of demolition to create another text, one of recuperation and remembering. The crashes and the derelict space of the exhibition (the warehouse on Hamilton Street) frame relics of the houses' histories as homes, the street numbers, the piano music, etc. Morgan provides her audience with technological and material fragments, not the seamless whole of mass-culture. Thus, the visitors' relationship with **Fugue** becomes an active one. They must assemble these fragments themselves to construct a text that they can understand. Ann Morrison comments on the

³⁴ The viewer who, upon entering into Morgan's installation experiences what Ann Morrison refers to as the "fugue state." As Morrison puts it, "The psychological trauma of the fugue state is one of dissociation and alienation." (Morrison 1984, p. 6) The dislocating effect of the live sound combined with the fragmented visual elements require that the viewer assist in constructing the piece.

participatory role of **Fugue's** viewer.

The viewer was placed in the middle of a stage set as both audience and participant, for with the immediacy of the demolition sounds, the ambivalence between performance and actuality increased. (Morrison 1984, p. 4)

The critique of modernity, formulated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, posits that total social institutions and dehumanising technologies have left modern men and women powerless to construct their own identities, unable even to recognise the plight of their conditions. The tenet of this critique is that technological society is greater than us, that it subsumes individual wills. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, "The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural." (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972, p. 154) That is, the specificities of the individual are tolerated, and even celebrated, by modern society so long as the individual conforms to the generalities of the society. They speculate that individual identity is no longer possible as individualism has just become another mass produced commodity of the culture industry.

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. (Horkheimer & Adorno 1972, p. 167)

Modernist critique holds that technology played an important role in subjugating the individual. Benjamin laments the disappearance of a pre-industrial era when natural and social phenomena could be experienced by the individual, unmediated by mechanical apparatus. Benjamin maintains that much of which constituted one's identity was radically altered or obliterated

by war and technology. The power ratio between technologised institutions, and individuals had increased so much in favour of the former that the individual could not trust that his personal experiences were his own anymore. Benjamin's concept of experience disappeared with technological society and with modernity the subject disappeared.

But, with **Fugue**, the individual is recuperated both in the work and in its presentation. As I explained earlier, Morgan creates a form of audio visual testament to the individuals who lived in these houses and whose lives were affected by their demolition. And, the audience participates in the construction of this work; the viewer is not simply a passive observer but is implicated in the work as an active participant. Like Benjamin's pre-technological experience, Morgan creates an experience which implicates the individual within his or her surroundings; the viewer is made self-aware and assists in the creation of meaning in the work.

4. Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House – Bill Viola

A much anticipated retrospective of Bill Viola's video tapes and installations was held at the *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal* in the spring of 1993. The installation **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** was the first work encountered after entering the exhibition galleries through a short dark passage. Before entering the large, almost empty, dark space of the installation, at the end of the passage, was a framed photograph of an iron bar and a text, both softly illuminated by a single spot light. If the viewer stopped to peruse this text, as I did, he or she would read a curious and disturbing account of an actual historical event.

The brief text recounted the story of Phineas Gage. A foreman, working for the Vermont railway in the nineteenth century, Gage was injured by a blast that sent an iron bar through his head. Miraculously, he survived the accident and, despite having a hole where the front of his brain had been, appeared at first to have not suffered any major physiological or psychological effects. Later, however, Gage's co-workers claimed that, since the accident, his temperament had changed radically and the once amicable Gage was now irritable and prone to fits of bad temper. Gage was subsequently laid off from the railroad and finished his life touring American fairgrounds as part of a freak show. Viola dedicated this installation to Gage's memory.

With this account of the transformation of character as a result of an accidental physical alteration of a man's brain in mind, the viewer enters the installation. At first view the installation seems to consist of a lone video monitor at the one end of the darkened room and a heavy wooden chair, with a pair of headphones attached. The viewer would traverse the room from its entrance to

sit in the chair facing the monitor. As he or she became accustomed to the darkness two larger speakers, hanging high from both ends of the wall at the opposite end of the room, would become visible. A loud bang would emanate from these at regular intervals of several minutes. Otherwise, the large speakers were silent; the bang resonating through the empty space shocked the unsuspecting viewer.

Once in the chair, the viewer could put on the headphones. The video showed the head and shoulders of a man (Viola) facing the camera looking tired and distraught. Through the headphones a combination of sounds could be heard. A multiplicity of voices, that seemed to suggest the man's thoughts, was combined with the sounds of his body recorded from the inside. The viewer could hear his breathing and, as the video monitor showed him drinking a glass of water, the viewer could hear the man swallowing. At a regular interval another person would enter the scene from behind the man, approach him, and hit him on the head. At this moment the viewer would experience a sudden loud crashing sound through the headphones that would invariably startle him or her. This sound was synchronised to coincide with the bang from the external speakers (also loud enough to be audible to the viewer wearing headphones).

Sound and the Body

Sitting in the chair, facing the man on the video screen our situation mirrors his. Our unease is enhanced by the darkness,³⁵ which cuts off our field

³⁵ Viola recognises that limiting visual information through darkness can suggest an interior state. In an interview he explains, "The rooms in the installations are black because this is the colour of the inside of your head." (Viola as quoted by Bélisle 1993, p. 15)

of vision, and by the headphones which cut off most of the external sounds while amplifying the internal ones. We are aware of the man's internal presence while being unaware of the external world.³⁶ This is a precarious position as our perception of what is around, what may potentially endanger us, has been impaired.

There is a certain physical effect that putting on a pair of headphones creates. Headphones impede external sounds from reaching us, making us more aware of our bodies' own sounds. Viola amplifies this effect by having us hear recordings of his body's interior. These sounds, along with the aural isolation created by wearing the headphones, and the visual isolation we feel in the dark space makes us feel uncomfortable and vulnerable.

In his essay '*Hallucinations acoustico-verbales*' Rosolato speculates that hearing contributes to the sense of vulnerability for the body. Unlike our eyes, we cannot close our ears; we hear sounds we may not wish to. Also, if those sounds frighten us we cannot easily determine their source; we cannot pinpoint them as we can with most visual phenomena. "*Tout cela rend le champ acoustique particulièrement **sensible**, soumis à plus d'indétermination, partant, à un surcroît de vigilance et d'interprétation dans l'attente.*" (Rosolato 1985, p. 278)

This installation is significant for its juxtaposition of interior and exterior sounds. While the video image only allows access to the man's external appearance, the headphones allow us access to the man's interior, the intimate sounds of his body and a recreation of his thoughts. Putting on the headphones

³⁶ Our awareness of an outside reality is immediately returned to us with the loud crash resounding from the external speakers which accompanies the video image of the blow on the head.

we tap into the unconscious of another. We hear thoughts made audible, corporal sounds, that normally are only perceptible to the individual him or herself. This is disturbing because we experience that which would normally be beyond our range of perception.³⁷

We can hear what Rosolato refers to as the *champ intérieur*. Hearing through the headphones links us to the man's body and to his unconscious. Rosolato situates hearing within the body by linking it to the inside of the body. If we were to divide corporal perception into exterior and interior zones we would find sight to occupy only the exterior whereas, as we can listen to many of the interior rumblings of our body (heart beating, digestive tracts functioning, bones creaking), hearing can be said to be sensitive to the body's interior.

... l'ouïe se réserve en quelque sorte le champ postérieur et interne: même l'intérieur du corps, invisible, lui est partiellement accessible par les bruits corporelles spontanés, circulatoires, digestifs, musculaires ou osseux. (Rosolato 1985, p. 277)

Rosolato also maintains that acoustico-verbal perception covers a different space from visual perception. Hearing occupies, what Rosolato refers to as, the '*champ postérieur*' as, unlike seeing, we can hear behind ourselves. Sitting in the darkness of Viola's installation, we hear the reverberations of the heavy object hitting the man's head over two loudspeakers. The uneasiness created by being attacked from behind is accentuated by the video image in which the man's attacker approaches him from behind without him being aware of his presence. We hear this sound from behind us; it frightens us because it

³⁷ What we, in reality, hear are recordings made from contact microphones of corporal sounds, sniffing, swallowing, etc., and from a mix of whispered voices. So, we are not, in fact, perceiving anything beyond the ordinary. But, these sounds, synchronised with the actions of the seated man, suggest that we are hearing the imperceptible to sufficiently render the experience disquieting.

occupies a space we cannot see, that we can hear but cannot consciously interpret visually.

So, it is through hearing that we are made aware of the vulnerability of our bodies. Viola puts us in an uncomfortable state in which our aural perception is amplified while the periphery of our vision is limited to the video screen. We are made of the limitations of our perception, of an unknown area beyond our bodies. We may be aurally aware of a presence behind us, but without seeing it we are unable to intellectually perceive, to precisely locate, what we hear. This invisible aural presence frightens us because it is an 'unknown' presence; we know few of the physical characteristics of what we hear so we imagine the worst for what we do not see.

Viola's installation reminds us that if we are made aware of the limitations of our perception, aware that we cannot see in the dark or behind us, we will feel vulnerable and afraid. But, it also reminds us that if we find ourselves perceiving more than we are used to, if we hear the inside of someone else's body, for instance, we also experience a sense of unease. As we hear the body's interior rumblings we become aware of our own corporal vulnerability, of our mortality. We know if, like Phineas Gage, our body is violated our intellectual identity will also be affected. Thus, to hear our *champ intérieur* is to be reminded of our fragile corporal constitution and to hear our *champ postérieur* reminds us of the limitations of our visual perception and, subsequently, the limitations of our intellectual awareness.

The limits of our physical selves, our sensorial perception, our mortality, reappears in all of Viola's work. As his work is time based, this corporal/intellectual dichotomy is reconstituted as experiences, (some, like

Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House, as physical experiences), for the viewer. Viola uses audio–visual technology to recreate something we know and have all perceived internally. But, he renders this experience communicable, available to whomever chooses to wear the headphones. It is this use of audio–visual technology as a medium for unconscious, corporal experience that pushes Viola's work beyond an arrangement of images and sounds to work that resonates the viewer's own past experiences and triggers his or her own memories.

Memory and Experience

Viola's video tapes and installations must be experienced perceptually to be understood. It is an experience of sound, duration and movement. In an early tape **The Space Between the Teeth** (1976) the viewer first experiences anticipation while the camera is fixed upon a man (Viola) sitting in a chair. The man screams. As if to physically echo the viewer's surprise the camera starts to pull back. It continues to pull slowly backwards through a hallway all the time directed at the seated man. The man screams again and simultaneously through a series of rapid edits the camera zooms in to a close–up of the man's face.

With this tape the viewer's anticipation is replaced with the sensation of sudden shock both from the loud scream breaking an otherwise quiet ambient soundtrack and from the sudden change of pace in editing and camera movement. The viewer's anticipation is subsequently heightened, waiting for the man to scream again and wondering where the camera will go. As with his later work, Viola plays with the viewers' attentiveness by surprising and

intriguing them with temporal changes in sound and imagery.

A tension is also created in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** by the contrast between the sudden loud knocks and the calmer periods between these. The temporal experience of the piece is charged, by the recurring image of the seated man being approached and struck from behind, and by the intermittent crashing sound intruding into the otherwise silent space.

Bergson refers to an ongoing passage through the present where the individual's experiences of the past accumulate inside him or her as memories. Bergson saw this mental process of accumulation of past experiences as a lived interior reality, as '*la durée intérieure*'. (Bergson 1938, pp. 200–201) The voices heard through the headphones in Viola's installation seem to stand for thoughts or memories made aural. According to Bergson, the past returns, in the form of memories, to affect the individual's experience of the present. This installation illustrates Bergson's model. The man approaching, the blow, could be interpreted as a recurring moments in the seated man's past, as memories that incessantly return to inform his present situation.

To Bergson our past is with us always. Our cerebral mechanism sends nearly all of our experiences into our unconscious leaving only those that are useful, that are necessary for our present situation, to remain in our consciousness. However, like the recurring blow on the head, unconscious memories may surface at random triggered by a variety of stimuli. As Viola stresses with the crash heard over the 'external' speakers sounds can have the effect of reviving unconscious memories; like the ring of an alarm clock, sounds can reawaken forgotten experiences.

Sound and the Unconscious

A recurring motif in Viola's work is the juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces. Viola links the two in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** by the sound which is heard both by the listener of the subject's interior, through the headphones, and by the viewer in the external space of the installation, over the large speakers.

This interior/exterior dichotomy is also evident in Viola's installation **Room for Saint John of the Cross** (1983) in which a small video monitor sits on a table in a small cubicle (suggesting a monk's cell) constructed within a larger gallery. Behind the cubicle and dominating the space is a large screen upon which a flickering, chaotic, black and white video image of mountains is projected. The image is accompanied by the menacing sounds of a storm. This is the exterior reality, unpredictable and frightening. On the small monitor, in the cubicle, is a serene colour image of a mountain and the voice of a man reading the love poems of Saint John. This tiny space represents the interior reality of the saint imprisoned in a cell so small he could not stand up in it, but in which he found the interior peace to write of beauty.

Thus, the exterior, the mountain, exists in the saint's interior but it has been filtered by his thoughts, his piety. Reality is the juxtaposition of a complex, unpredictable external world processed through cerebral mechanisms, (also complex and unpredictable). The result is an ordered, aesthetic interpretation of that world, the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.

What is interesting in Viola's work is that he treats neurological processes (what we hear through the headphones in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House**), and natural phenomena (the storm in the mountains in

Room for Saint John of the Cross), with the same aleatory structure. He also treats social events as chaotic, unpredictable phenomena. His installation **Passage** (1987) blows up and slows down images from a child's birthday party. With these alterations of time and space the event becomes less a narrative and more a nonlinear series of textures and surfaces. It is not the specifics of landscape, of thoughts, or of social events that Viola presents to us but rather their complex, unpredictable structure.

The complex, and seemingly random, construction of the 'internal' (headphone) soundtrack in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** lends itself to experiential and mnemonic stimulation of the viewer's unconscious. Viola mixes an agglomeration of sounds, of voices and of corporal resonances, to construct a dense aural signal. The signal, in its complexity, reflects the structure of our thought processes³⁸ and the 'unpredictability' of our cerebral and biological make-up.

'Unpredictability' for Albert Jacquard is a condition of uncertainty and incompleteness. It is the unpredictability of the organic make-up of the observer, that makes it possible for him or her to be incorporated into the(unpredictable) reality that he or she is observing. Thus, with Viola's installation, we respond to the complex signal heard through the headphones because its structure is inherently recognisable to us. The aleatoric sequence and layering of the voices and other sounds intrigues us as it echoes our

³⁸ The neuro-biologist Henri Atlan suggests that thought is so complex and unpredictable that it can best be referred to in terms of noise.

thought processes and organic structure.³⁹

The various audio and video stimuli comprising **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** correspond to the range and limitations of human sight and hearing. We listen to a recording of the inside of the artist's body as if it were our own. Sitting in the chair, we hear behind us but our vision is limited to the dimensions of the video screen in front of us. This installation addresses us corporally because we experience it as an acoustic space that echoes our bodies' aural perception.

Viola's installation also addresses our unconscious by incorporating forms which resemble it. The experience of time as a duration of anticipation punctuated by unexpected instances of sudden aural stimuli echoes the operation of memory; preoccupied with the present, we are often caught off guard by the sudden resurgence of a moment from the past triggered by a familiar sound or sensation.

The dense layering of the sounds heard over the headphones demands that we listen to a multiplicity of signals simultaneously. This complex soundtrack is a crude aural model of our thought processes and even of the workings of our bodies, (at any given moment systems of circulation, digestion, respiration, etc., are functioning simultaneously). Thus, we cannot help but respond on a corporal and unconscious level to the aural 'experience' of **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House**.

³⁹ Jacquard suggests that uncertainty is a positive attribute suggesting the observer's implication within the 'complexité' of the universe. He writes of uncertainty, "*...il s'agit aussi de la prise de conscience de notre appartenance au monde que nous décrivons, et de la nécessaire modification que nous lui imposons par le fait même que nous l'étudions.*" (Jacquard 1986, p. 62)

5. *Impression débâcle* – Michèle Waquant

La grande salle rectangulaire est plongée dans la pénombre. On entre. De plusieurs sources jaillissent des voix, des sirènes d'ambulance, des bruits d'eau qui coule et de glaces qui se brisent. Douze enceintes acoustiques traversent l'espace en diagonale, formant une petite colonnade; quatre autres sont suspendues aux murs. Tout de suite on est happé par deux images vidéo géantes qui se rejoignent au coin d'un mur (et qui s'unissent parfois pour n'en former qu'une). (Guilbert 1993, p. 29)

What drew me into Michèle Waquant's installation *Impression débâcle* was its noise. A complexity of recorded voices and sounds of running water, of resonating crashes, leaked out of the project room at Montreal's *Musée d'art contemporain*. These sounds played on my aural curiosity luring me into the dark gallery space to find their source. Upon entering the gallery my attention was first drawn to the light of two video projectors converging in one corner of the space. To my left was the dimmer glow of a single video monitor in the opposite corner.

On y voit une rivière, des vapeurs, des glaces qui défilent: images de nature exclusivement, brutes, texturées, grisâtres. Dans le coin opposé à la double projection, un petit moniteur diffuse des images précises, lumineuses et colorées, de la rivière encore, mais aussi des lieux environnants et des personnes qui y habitent. (Guilbert 1993, p. 29)

The imagery projected into the corner of the gallery was of ice floes on a fast moving river. Segments of the projected sequence had been filmed at night with the glowing white ice floating against the sombre tones of brown and red that pass for black in video. Waquant had manipulated the imagery, at times slowing down the movement or using soft wipes as a transition from one scene to another. Although the images came from two separate projectors, their

beams crossing as they projected upon the perpendicular surfaces, they would at times combine to form a single, horizontally elongated image. Waquant made use of the synchronised double projection to provide a panoramic view of the passing ice. This form lent itself well to the horizontally flowing river, which seemed to flow around me when I stood close to the corner in which the video beam was projected.

Other video images, displayed on the monitor in the opposite corner, were of the landscape, architecture and residents of a small Québec town in winter. Candid shots of the residents daily interaction with the river were included. Notable among these was the cliché image of boys playing hockey on its frozen surface.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark I became aware of twelve uniform, waist high, oblong boxes standing on end. These were evenly spaced one from another, in two rows, bisecting the gallery diagonally. This 'colonnade' formed a porous barrier between the opposing corners illuminated by the complementary video signals. Approaching these boxes I soon realised that they were in fact loudspeakers, each one emitting a different sound. There were voices speaking French, apparently taken from interviews, recounting personal experiences and anecdotes, (the object of these oral testaments, however, was not at first listen completely clear to me). Also audible were recordings from the radio of weather forecasts and news bulletins. And, there were also sounds of flowing river water and deep crashing noises. In combination with the projected video I quickly understood that the latter were the sounds of the ice breaking up on a river in spring.

Débâcle, in English, means breaking up as in 'the ice breaking up.' The

pamphlets at the entrance of the gallery space explained to me that all the video images were filmed by the Chaudière river in eastern Québec. They were filmed at the time of the thaw when the river is transformed from a frozen white surface to a rushing current upon which ice floes rush by crashing against each other and the shore.

Complex Sound

If the video imagery of *Impression Débâcle* could be understood as providing a reportage of the event of the ice breaking up (video projection) and of the region (video monitor), the sound provides a more complex message. We hear sounds of the rumbling and crashing ice that accompany the video imagery but, Waquant also transforms the event into spoken text; we also hear a multitude of voices all telling different tales.⁴⁰

The order of reality that is proposed in the work of Michèle Waquant is one in which the totality of simultaneous audio–visual emissions is more important than the individual meanings that can be ascribed to each of these. The disparate and ephemeral aural presence of *Impression débâcle* prevents us from focusing on any point fixed in space and time. Yet, at the same time, it is this aural 'flux' that directs our experience of this installation.

By weaving together diverse oral and indexical sound sources Waquant has reinterpreted a culturally defining, natural ritual as noise. That is, as a complex matrix of signals which reach their receptor, the gallery visitor,

⁴⁰ Upon a closer listen it becomes apparent that the explicit and implicit objects of the recorded voices, intermingled with the natural ambient noise of the river, are the experiences that the annual break up of the ice on the Chaudière provokes.

simultaneously. As we are confronted with a multiplicity of different sounds and voices and watch an interlaced montage of different images we become aware that we cannot grasp all that is going on. We attempt to order all this information and continually find ourselves confronting disorder – noise that evades and confuses our system of receiving information.

Aurally, noise has been analysed as being composed of a multiplicity of sound waves of differing frequencies all being produced simultaneously. Noise has the ability to cover up, or veil other sounds which are included in its complex signal.⁴¹ Noise contains so much superfluous information that it hampers the transmission of the intended signal in a given system of communication. But noise, in its complexity, also has the potential to simultaneously transmit far greater amounts of information than a discrete signal would.⁴²

In *Impression débâcle* we are bombarded with aural information. If we attempt to isolate one signal we will have trouble hearing it as all the other signals will interfere with our reception. But, if we allow all the signals to be received simultaneously the composite sounds produce an effect that cannot be attained by the culmination of simply listening to each of the signals individually.

⁴¹ This is not simply a situation where the noise is louder and more dominant than other simultaneous sounds. Noise is said to 'eat' sound by actually cancelling out frequencies that are the inverse of its component frequencies.

⁴² The combination of many signals reaching the listener at once is defined by Henri Atlan as a condition of *complexité*, or complexity. Atlan maintains that although noise impedes the transmission of simple signals of information, it also allows for more information to be transmitted simultaneously. "...en diminuant la transmission d'information dans les voies de communications à l'intérieur du système, les facteurs de bruit diminuent la redondance du système en général, et par là même augmentent sa quantité d'information." (Atlan 1979, p. 47)

The event recounted by *Impression débâcle* is presented to us an agglomeration of information, as a series of impressions. It evokes the event because, like the event itself, it is not experienced from a single perspective. We watch imagery that at times can be read (the children playing hockey) and at times can be felt, the abstract forms of ice responding to the river's current. Likewise, the diverse soundtracks operate on different degrees of intelligibility and sensorial effect.

Despite its use of spoken text, *Impression débâcle* is neither a descriptive account, nor a rational explanation of the annual event of the ice breaking up. Instead, Waquant has reconstituted the natural event as a series of experiences, as ambient sounds, as voices, as moving images. This work cannot be analysed via its composite parts, as this complex installation defies a reading which isolates discrete elements. Instead, it is necessary to examine certain inherent properties of this work, its voices, to understand how it evokes experience. In Waquant's piece there are voices that function as oral accounts (as electronic storytelling) that interpret the annual phenomenon. And, there are 'removed' voices, posed as questions, that evoke the unconscious presence of the artist recording the event.

Electronic Storytelling

Waquant finds room for individual memories in her mêlée of disarray. The phenomenon of the ice breaking up is relived through voices, speaking in the first person, that not only recount the event but reconstitute the experience of it. Voices tell personal histories of previous ice break-ups on the Chaudière. Anecdotes on the beauty of spring and the production of maple syrup are

included as well as broadcast radio reports of weather conditions and political developments. By listening to these recorded texts we receive a certain amount of verbal information about the ice break-up but, through their voices, we also gain an understanding of the individuals who experience this event annually. How these people speak reveals as much about their lives than what they say. Waquant juxtaposes different voices and different types of speech to construct her complex vocal landscape. The anecdotal storytelling voices are those of the locals and as such they have regional accents and speak from memory. Hearing the voices of weather reporters and the newscasters (recorded from national broadcasts) juxtaposed with those of the locals we are aware of the prepared text and the trained accent, the ideologically constructed experience, of the former. The artist uses the voices speaking the regional dialect and recounting local events to establish the socio-cultural identity of the speakers. Thus, she reinterprets the natural phenomena of the ice breaking up as a social event.

Listening to the separate voices it becomes less important what is said than how it is said. The manner of speaking in the recounting of the experience becomes an experience in itself for the listener. This experience recalls the activities of the storyteller, the human repository of collective experience in an oral society.⁴³ The storyteller embodies experience. He or she tells of his or her own experiences or experiences of others that have been passed on to him or her. The telling is an experience, both on the part of the storyteller and on the

⁴³ Benjamin identifies two types of storytellers. The first is the traveller (in the case of *Impression débâcle* the artist, Waquant) who recounts experiences of foreign lands – "the lore of faraway places." The second knows the history of the place in which he or she lives (the voices heard in Waquant's installation) – "the lore of the past." (Benjamin 1968, p. 85)

part of the listener. After the telling the listener also has an experience which he or she may pass on to others.⁴⁴

Whereas the information that reaches us through mass-media is verifiable and contains possible explanations for events stories told do not always have verifiable sources nor do they necessarily include explanations. It is up to the listener to interpret meaning in a story and thus assist in its construction and apply it to his own experience. According to Benjamin, the storyteller draws from memory to tell his epic story. He or she draws from a multiplicity of experiences of many people. The storyteller remembers all the stories that he or she has been told and it is his or her role that the story is committed to the memories of its listeners. Michèle Waquant assumed the activities of Benjamin's storyteller in constructing *Impression débâcle*. She made recordings of the stories of many residents of the Chaudière region which she replays, retelling them technologically, in her installation.

Voice and Subjectivity

Among the noise, the voices from the broadcast media and the local accounts recorded by Waquant another set of voices can be discerned in *Impression débâcle*. They seem to float above the other sounds, (they, in fact

⁴⁴ Benjamin contrasts storytelling with the act of reading which does not constitute the same kind of collective experience. An individual reads alone, consuming information but not experiencing wisdom.

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. (Benjamin 1968, p. 87)

emanate from four speakers suspended high on each wall of the gallery). The tone of these voices differs significantly from those resonating from the floor-bound speakers. They are spoken with a French accent and, instead of telling long rambling accounts of events, these voices pose curt questions.

Des voix à l'accent français ne cessent de poser de brèves questions: "Qui est-tu? Ça ira? Qui est là?" Progressivement, on s'aperçoit que l'artiste a exploité le lien fort qu'il y a entre la débâcle et l'inquiétude. (Guilbert 1993, p. 30)

"Who are you?", "Who's there?", "How are you?" These voices are more autobiographical than the others and function as a sort of voice-off for the subjective uncertainty of the artist.⁴⁵ We know, despite the confusion, that someone was there, listening to the noise, experiencing the event, remembering and thinking.

Here, the viewer is presented with the skeleton of a cinematic construction in which the imagery and the sounds of the grounded speakers are within the film's diegesis and the questioning voices from above function as a sort of extra-diegetic unconscious.⁴⁶ These voices, evoking displacement and self reflection, allude to Waquant's own experience. The extra-diegetic voices

⁴⁵ Michèle Waquant moved to France from Québec in 1980 to study and presently lives and works in Paris. Her 'québécoise' identity in Europe is betrayed by her accent which is different from the French accents heard in *Impression débâcle*. Like those voices, we can imagine the locals questioning Waquant's presence, as a foreigner, in France.

⁴⁶ In her essay "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space" Doane explains how the film soundtrack functions in creating the film's 'diegetic' space. The space of the 'diegesis' is the virtual space constructed by the film which has both visual and aural traits and includes the space seen on the screen, but also virtual space beyond it. This space suspends the audience's belief in the cinematic text. Sound also enhances the 'presence' of the characters depicted through techniques such as 'voice-off' in which the character can have a diegetic presence in a film without actually being seen on the screen.

that are subtle reminders of the artist's subjectivity.

Recent film theory posits that the soundtrack of a film functions on another level of signification than the image. Psychoanalytically, the image stands for conscious reality; thus, the unconscious, invisible, and female, subject of the film is located in its soundtrack.⁴⁷ Mary Ann Doane recognises that the soundtrack of a film is often received as a text that is less precise, more ambiguous than the image.

If the ideology of the visible demands that the spectator understand the image as a truthful representation of reality, the ideology of the audible demands that there exist simultaneously a different truth and another order of reality for the subject to grasp. (Doane 1985, p. 55)

If there exists a perceptual hierarchy in the cinematic experience where sound is subordinate to the image then the image accompanying a sound affects the latter's reception. Thus, voice in cinema connotes very different meanings depending upon its relationship with the image. Doane identifies the 'voice-over' as opposed to 'voice-off') in cinema as the voice outside of the narrative; we never see the speaker who occupies a space temporally and spatially beyond the diegesis. The speaker of the voice-over, historically almost exclusively male, possesses a knowledge that the characters in the diegesis do not have.

⁴⁷ Kaja Silverman also posits that woman's voice in classic cinema is an interior voice. She is careful to point out that interiority does not necessarily connote intellectual nor spiritual depth. For Silverman the position of interiority occupied by women in film is one of entrapment and isolation.

Far from being a privileged condition, synonymous with soul, spirit, or consciousness, interiority in Hollywood films implies linguistic constraint and physical confinement – confinement to the body, to claustal spaces, and to inner narratives. (Silverman 1988, p. 45)

The disembodied, floating voices heard in *Impression débâcle*, form a kind of voice-over that go beyond the other, more impressionist elements of the installation. They are not about the natural event of the ice break-up, nor do they socialise this event. They are the interior voices of the author, not just another recorded account of the event, expressing her own subjectivity vis-à-vis the event and her reconstruction of it.

Michèle Waquant reconstructs the event of the '*débâcle*' on multiple levels. The viewer receives visual information of the phenomenon through dynamic video footage of one spring's break-up of ice on the Chaudière river. Aurally the documentation (and construction) is more complex. It is a series of noises both natural and human. The event is interpreted as the sum of an indeterminate amount of individual experiences. Thus it exists as both a collective memory and as a series of individual ones. It also has unconscious connotations evoked by the 'removed' voices floating above the others. Ultimately, there is no single text to recount and explain this event, because like the event itself, its personal and social effects are infinitely complex. Waquant is successful in evoking this complexity through the use of a soundtrack that is both dense with information and effect and multi-dimensional within the exhibition space.

III. CONCLUSION

Marshall McLuhan saw the artist as a visionary who could reflect the changing 'nature' of the modern world. This was particularly true for McLuhan when the artist used or referred to new technologies.

But in the past century it has come to be generally acknowledged that, in the words of Wyndham Lewis, "The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present." Knowledge of this simple fact is now needed for human survival. The ability of the artist to sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age-old. (McLuhan 1964, p. 65)

Although McLuhan did tend to ascribe quasi-clairvoyant attributes to artistic vision, attributes to which I do not adhere, he did anticipate contemporary artists' practice of subverting new technologies to bring back experiences. Contemporary artists recover the experiences which, according to McLuhan, had been lost or marginalised with the development of the printing press and industrialisation. The artists I have written about all do this. In each of their works a specific type of experience is suggested, geographic, unconscious, interior, urban, etc. And, all these artists use (or, in the case of Beuys, refer to) technological sound to evoke these experiences.

In each of these works the effects, social, psychological and otherwise, of the component technologies are questioned. What unites all of these artists is that they all take a critical position vis-à-vis the technologies in their work. As Walter Benjamin wrote about daguerreotypy (photography), technology erases the human reciprocity of direct (person to person) communication.

What was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze. But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. (Benjamin 1968, pp. 187–188)

Recalling Benjamin's critique of technological reproduction these artists know of the effects the technologies they use have had on the individual and collective experiences of the community. These artists are aware that, like the bulldozers heard as they destroy houses in Joey Morgan's piece, technologies of reproduction have irrevocably altered the intimacy and directness of pre-technological forms of communication and experience.

Despite their shared critical intent these artists' practises are not homogeneous. If we consider the technologies employed, strategies of audio-visual juxtapositions and methodologies of the five artists discussed we discover a variety of art-making strategies. Their different 'approaches' to art each have their own histories and ideologies which are often at odds with one another.⁴⁸

Bill Viola has long been considered a 'video' artist. That is to say that like a painter uses paint, Viola uses the specificities of the electronic image and sounds of video to make art. Video art is often considered a sub-category of a

⁴⁸ An example of the different strategies would be Stan Douglas' use of appropriated (documentary) images and text as opposed to Michèle Waquant's own recordings of events and accounts. Douglas' approach might distrust the objectivity and non-recognition of the author in Waquant's method of documentation; Douglas' imagery is about its own inscription (as a stage in the development of cinema) as much as it is about the subject portrayed. This is at odds with Waquant's strategy of framing, recording, and editing her own perspective of her subjects. With *Impression débâcle* it is the eye (and ear) of the individual we are looking and hearing through. With *Overture* it is not the individual but history that we are experiencing.

larger art paradigm, a sub-category, like ceramics or photography, that is defined by the materials and technology used in the artwork's production.

Although Stan Douglas often uses film and video in his work he is rarely considered to be a film or video artist. Rather, his work often falls under the category of conceptual art as the *mise-en-scène* stems from a predetermined concept which has a certain intellectual resonance. With **Overture** the 'idea' of texts from *À la recherche du temps perdu* combined with archival footage of the Canadian Pacific railroad is as integral to the work as is its cinematic form.

Joseph Beuys contributed, in his own way, to the history of the politically engaged artist. Like his compatriots of previous generations, George Grosz and John Heartfield, Beuys laments a (German) society that has become materialistic and is lacking in spiritual identity. Beuys work always contained a social undertone of rescue and preservation of the human spirit. The felt-lined chamber of **Plight** preserves the act of artistic creation as it preserves the emblematic, silent grand piano. With his engagement with the International Students Party, and later the Green Party, Beuys' socio-political concerns cannot be overlooked. Thus, when we consider Beuys we cannot deny a will to instigate political change through the social effects the exhibition and dissemination of his work might have.

Another kind of social undertone can be discerned in **Fugue**. Morgan has us witness (aurally) urban transformation and consider its unquantifiable social side effects. Unlike Beuys' transformed pianos, records and other objects, **Fugue** is not an assemblage that serves as a symbol for our social condition. Morgan's work is more process oriented. She sets up a system, in the case of **Fugue** a system of aural transmission, which responds to diverse stimuli. The

nature of **Fugue**, in its first incarnation, is the dynamic workings of the system itself.

Michèle Waquant's *Impression débâcle*, despite its fragmented cacophonous audio visual form, acknowledges and builds on an historical, photographic approach to landscape, (an approach which in turn draws on a much older tradition of landscape painting). This is most evident in the horizontal form of the dual video projection which recalls the wide perspective of the panoramic photograph. But it is also apparent in Waquant's compositions of the social and natural landscape surrounding the Chaudière river which appear on the opposing solitary monitor. Indeed, the installation itself echoes the horizontal format of landscape photography. The speakers cross the floor of the gallery as a river would the bottom portion of a landscape photographed.

Thus these works can fall under diverging classifications in the art paradigm. Some could be referred to as video art, others as conceptual, political, photographic, process art, etc. These works, in their variety, are fragments of the pluralistic state of visual art in the late twentieth century.

The Contemporary Art Paradigm

What stands out in all of the work I examine are the ways in which sound and technology are used to evoke experience. But, beyond the use of sound, the work of these five artists is not specifically linked one to another. The choice of material and sources available to contemporary artists is wide. Thus, the fact that the five artists I write about use technological sound in their work does not make their practise particularly unique, nor does it necessarily suggest a commonality, among other contemporary art practises.

All of these works share a common trait of having been situated, by a hegemony of influential institutions which include art dealers, funding agencies, museums, art colleges and magazines, within the defined parameters of contemporary art. Contemporary art is an arena of practises that extends the activities of the artist beyond the fabrication of pictures and sculptures.

In some ways contemporary art could be seen to respond to McLuhan's desire for art as a form of information, a lucid reflection of our collective consciousness.

I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties. Would we, then, cease to look at works of art as an explorer might regard the gold and gems used as the ornaments of simple nonliterate? (McLuhan 1964, p. 66)

Many contemporary artists produce temporary installations, performances, films and videos, large scale paintings, photographs, etc.; there is little direct emphasis on producing marketable commodities.⁴⁹ However, often the work loses any direct social effect it might have by sitting in museums, galleries and collections whose only purpose are to house and exhibit it.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The tendency away from the decorative object status of art during the last half of this century would seem to lend art this role of social consciousness, free of market interests. But, art, contemporary and otherwise, remains a market commodity to be collected and exchanged. It is just that as far as collectors are concerned it is the artist who is collected, not the object; if the artist's name has reached a certain stature his or her work will be bought.

⁵⁰ For Theodor Adorno museums were not only buildings which isolated art from society, they were mausoleums for the cadavers of artworks whose social pertinence had passed away upon their entry into them. Museums, according to Adorno, "...owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present." Adorno continued his comparison by saying, "Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art." (Adorno, as quoted by Crimp 1983, p. 43)

In its formal autonomy, its use of non-conventional art materials, the work I discuss descends from the historical avant-garde. Dada and other movements sought to liberate art from its institutionalisation by exploring new forms and materials. By pushing the form art could take they believed that they would make it available to more people. And, the use of new technologies was part of the avant-garde's strategies. As I have noted earlier this strategy failed due, in part, to the broad appeal of the new mass-culture that coincided with the demise of the avant-garde. But, even if the explicit project of the avant-garde (to reintegrate art into daily life) failed its effects live on in the possibilities of form and content it has made available to later artists. In theory, contemporary art has no formal constraints; it may take radical form. The expanded palette first used by the avant-garde is not only available to today's artists but it is often expected of contemporary artists to explore new media.

Art and Technology

The liberation from conventional art practises was first noted when the avant-garde moved away from the traditions of painting and sculpture and into mixed media collage, and interdisciplinary performance events. The period before and after the First World War (1910-30) was a fertile time for experimenting with new technologies. Dadaists, Constructivists, Futurists and Surrealists set the stage for the use of image and sound reproduction technologies, photography, cinema, and phonography, as artists' media in themselves. These technologies were explored by the avant-garde for their potential as art forms and not just as methods for documenting and reproducing existing art forms. As the twentieth century unfolded artists began to produce

films, photographs, sound-making machines and multi-media performances.

This experimentation subsided during the years of the depression and the Second World War and it was not until later in the post war period, in the 1950s and 1960s, that experimentation with new media really recommenced with the activities of Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, and other participants of the international Fluxus movement. Influenced by John Cage's musical experiments with radio Vostell and Paik manipulated television sets to alter the images received. Other Fluxus artists produced films, records and multi-media performances.

The late 1960s saw the development of a new, very ambitious approach towards art and technology. The Art and Technology movement, inspired by the technological utopianism of the space age, sought interaction among artists, scientists and technicians. In "How Intimate Can Art and Technology Really Be? A Survey of The Art and Technology Movement of the Sixties" Marga Bijvoet examines a series of collaborative projects which took place in the late 1960s in New York and California. Bijvoet remarks that these experimental projects coincided with an intent among artists at this time to produce 'dematerialised' works and refers to the burgeoning interest artists of the 1960s took in 'happenings', performance and film.

New technologies were explored by artists at this time to emulate natural and artificial systems. Artists produced 'kinetic art', 'light sculptures' and staged complex multi-media events. A key term of this era was 'cybernetics', the science of the organisation of information, based on mathematical formulae. Bijvoet observed that this art reflected McLuhan's remark that the entire environment was ready to become a work of art; the artists were interested in

producing systems and environments. She describes the 'Nine Evenings' event organised by the artist Robert Rauschenberg and the engineer Billy Klüver and notes the, "... performances combined the use of carefully programmed and designed systems with various 'found' signals and images, used as either compositional elements or instructional 'triggers'." (Bijvoet 1991, p. 24)

The aim of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology, one incarnation of the Art and Technology movement) was to bring artists in contact with engineers and scientists to solve specific problems on an equally creative basis. Artists gained access to new technology. (Bijvoet 1991, p 32) The feeling among artists was that they were engaged in something new and very pertinent at this time. Bijvoet quotes Robert Rauschenberg in 1969 as saying:

We can't afford to wait. We must force a relationship on technology in order to continue and we must move quickly. The most positive thing I can say is that technology does not lead us back into history – but advances us into the unknown. (Robert Rauschenberg as quoted by Bijvoet 1991, p. 25)

There was an underlying teleology ascribed to interventions in art and technology at this time. The feeling was that technology would lead art to something greater, some new techno-cultural epiphany. What has evolved since the activities of these artists in the 1960s is the reassessment of technology's potential. The next generation of artists, those that I investigate, are more critical than those of the Art and Technology movement towards the role technology has played and will play in our society. The change of spirit, the disappearance of the optimism surrounding art and technology activities was already becoming apparent by the middle of the 1970s. With the resistance to the Vietnam war and the abuses of technology it entailed, the willingness of

artists to participate with technological enterprises waned. Bijvoet notes that the concept of collaboration between art and science or art and technology became less attractive (and, I would add, less realisable) for artists. Instead of collaborating, artists, who could afford it, would now simply hire technicians to assist them with technical problems. "Artists would subsequently rather 'commission' the expertise of specialists to solve a specific project related problem." (Bijvoet 1991, p. 35) The utopian image of the artist working in tandem with the scientist had, for the most part, disappeared by the 1980s.⁵¹

Despite certain similarities with the form of some of the Art and Technology pieces, (for example, the 'process' aspect of Joey Morgan's work), the artworks I discuss have more in common with Dada, with an earlier avant-garde's use of technology as a form of backhanded social critique than with the utopianism of the Art and Technology movement.⁵² In both the post-modern era of the 1980s and the period of the historical avant-garde there is an engagement by artists with technology. But in both cases the shortcomings and defects of technology are also foregrounded as if to question the side effects of technological image and sound reproduction then and now.

An early example of this would be Eric Satie's and René Clair's film *Entr'acte* (1924) which was projected during the intermission of Francis

⁵¹ Currently, there is a resurgent interest in art and new technologies brought on by the new developments, and new availability, of computer technology. There is the annual exhibition of *Images du futur* in Montréal which exhibits works, often realised by engineers and technicians, which make use of sophisticated holographic, electronic and computer technologies. However, these technologically centred manifestations still remain on the margins of a larger contemporary art practice that is less medium specific.

⁵² Indeed the Art and Technology movement would seem to resemble more the utopian aspirations of the Italian Futurists than the ironic social critique of Dada.

Picabia's and Satie's ballet *Relâche*. There was no musical accompaniment to the silent film. Instead, Satie conceived that the sound of the film would be the sound of people getting up from their chairs for the intermission. (Elsaesser 1987, p. 20) Here, the illusionary potential of cinema was rejected in favour of an event in which the audience (involuntarily) constructed the soundtrack. This, for me, is an early example of experimentation with technologically reproduced experience. The film could only be appreciated as part of a lived (direct) experience of the *soirée* with its noisy audience. Outside of this context, the film's paradoxical (*avant-garde*) soundtrack disappeared.

In a more contemporary example, Stan Douglas' *Overture* also critiques the nature of film's presence. He deliberately uses a piece of archival film, complete with dust, grain and scratches, as his source. Here the history of cinema is foregrounded as is its physicality. Douglas does not use this loop of archival film as a medium for communicating a message or text. Rather the film itself, with all its historical and technological references is the (visual) text. In combination with the voice-over, citations from *fin-de-siècle* literature, (from Proust), the film projection has a connotative presence; cinema evokes an experience specific to an era.

The Technologies of Mass-Communication

With *Overture*, Douglas shares an approach towards mass-communication with the other artists I investigate. They take mass-media devices, television sets, film projectors, audio amplifiers and speakers, and use them for other purposes than mass-communication, for a more personal, intimate effect on their (limited) audience.

It is important to note that the media of distribution for this work are not its component apparatuses drawn from mass-communication technologies (tape players or film and video projectors), but, the distribution media are rather the museums and galleries in which these artists exhibit. And these, if we wish to borrow a term from McLuhan are decidedly 'narrowcast' media; contemporary art galleries and museums serve a small informed public.

Thus, the effects of the work I refer to are best defined through the reception of the individual viewer. This is why I focus primarily on what happens to the individual viewer (myself) when confronted by this work in a gallery, museum, or video screening room. It is important to note at this point that I am not referring solely to the nineteenth-century concept of 'aesthetic experience'. This type of experience Peter Bürger rightly maintained was restricted to the bourgeoisie and aristocracy as only members of these classes had the free time to engage in such exercises of contemplation. The technologically enhanced experiences provided by Viola, Douglas et al. are not simply a states of contemplation but constitute, rather, corporeal and psychological effects on their viewers.

With the work functioning in this manner, to consider its effects in terms of its mass reception, as one might consider newspapers or television, would be false, as the work affects few people directly. The link this contemporary work has with the historical avant-garde becomes more tenuous when considering its limited direct social effect. There was a certain consensus among avant-garde artists that they could produce a truly popular art, an art that could be easily incorporated into daily life. They believed that the new media, the new

reproduction technologies of the time, could be the vehicles for this project.⁵³

Three quarters of a century after the historical avant-garde, the effects of mass-media and mass-culture felt globally, many contemporary artists have no such illusions of direct influence on society. These artists, for the most part, work without a social project, without manifestos. Unlike the historical avant-garde, they have no illusions about a direct transformation of society through their art.⁵⁴ Instead, the artists I study turn technology inwards to reflect the effects of the media on the mass. There is no 'technicism' at play here, no drive to use the 'cutting edge' of technology. This is why Stan Douglas uses a film projection in the age of video and Joseph Beuys a piano in the age of the compact disc. The technology, rather than the image it projects or the sound it emits, becomes the art object.

We notice the technologies these artists use because they have been subtly modified in order to evoke an experience rather than to function as simple communication devices. Michèle Waquant combines two video projections to reconstruct the flow of a river as an elongated video image. Bill Viola divides a video soundtrack between headphones and large speakers to reproduce the effect of hearing internally and externally. Joey Morgan displaces a live sound of urban demolition into an abandoned warehouse, to echo the dislocating effect of urban transformation.

⁵³ A more appropriate contemporary example of the avant-garde will to reach the masses would be Christo, whose recent wrapping of the *Reichstag* was witnessed by millions as a media event.

⁵⁴ Joseph Beuys is the exception here. Beuys had formulated an active role for art as a harbinger of social change. His *Sozial Plastik* theory saw a society in which everyone would be an artist and social participation would be considered a creative activity.

Here, this technological work recalls Henri Bergson's concept of the "*continuité d'écoulement*"; the work echoes our lived experience because it is in a state of continual transition. Like the river flowing 'through' Waquant's installation the dynamic aspect of these pieces is significant because they cannot be experienced as fixed forms. It is the motion of the film running through the projector and the train passing through the tunnel, not a projected still, that constitute the visual focus of **Overture**. Even Beuys' static **Plight** incorporates an element of flux (the constantly expanding and contracting mercury in the thermometer) and anticipates the passage of time with its stifled silent piano.

The effects of these works are corporal as well as temporal. Guy Rosolato identified sound as a physical phenomenon felt by the whole body. This is most evident with **Fugue** in which the powerful amplification of the transmitted demolition sounds physically shook the abandoned warehouse as well as the audience for Morgan's piece occupying it. The electronically reproduced voice figures in three of the installations I discuss. In these, technology reproduces a type of sound – voice – that Rosolato characterised as being inextricably linked to the body of both the emitter of the sound and of its listeners. Entering **Overture** the amplified voice is not only heard through our ears but is felt by our bodies as we experience the indexically reproduced signature – the recorded voice – of another body.

That these artists make use of electronic technology to evoke experience supports McLuhan's hypothesis, elaborated in *Gutenberg Galaxy*, that new technologies can recover non-verbal communication.

Our new electric technology that extends our senses and nerves in a global embrace has large implications for the future of language. Electric technology does not need words any more than the digital computer needs numbers. Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalisation whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men. (McLuhan 1962, p. 80)

McLuhan's concept of 'collective awareness' seems to echo Benjamin's idea of 'collective memory' which the latter saw to be disappearing with the development of mass-culture, mass-destruction (war) and urbanisation at the beginning of this century. Collective memory is also recovered through artists using technology in this work. Joey Morgan evokes a displaced community through sound in **Fugue** and Michèle Waquant uses multiplicity of voices and sounds to reconstitute the social and natural geography of a community as an electronic experience.

The Recovery of Experience

This art recovers the collective experience, the ritual, that Benjamin saw as being lost to technology. This ritual returns in different ways. The art is an event that the viewer must enter, like a Mass or a spectacle. And, like attending a ritual, like going to church, we must make that journey from where we are to another place, in most cases the museum or gallery, in order to live the experience.⁵⁵

As Benjamin noted, the sacred art object when isolated from its ritual

⁵⁵ Even site-specific works such as Morgan's *Fugue* which was exhibited in an abandoned warehouse require that the spectator make the journey to experience the piece. Indeed, as with *Fugue*, entering a site selected by the artist is often an important aspect of the piece.

setting loses its aura. If we isolate discrete elements from these works, Beuys' thermometer or Morgan's house numbers, they lose their significance, as elements of an experience they lose their aura. Seeing Douglas' film projection does not convey the same experience without hearing the accompanying text. We can identify a synaesthetic aspect to all of this work; it addresses several of our senses simultaneously. These are all works one has to experience as multi-sensorial event. And, much of the work plays with what we do not see or hear, (the darkness of **Overture** and of **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House** or the silence of **Plight**), as much as with what we see and hear.

Benjamin saw mechanical reproduction as reducing the distance between the artwork and its viewer thus diminishing the work's aura. Through reproduction, art works became available to anyone, anywhere. But these 'installation' works could be said to reverse this trend as the complexity of their *mise-en-scène* demands that the spectator be there with the work to fully experience it. Indeed, the technological aspect of this work actually increases its 'distance' from the spectator. True, the audio visual technologies bring the object closer to the spectator; we can see Waquant's river and hear Morgan's demolished houses. But as I stated earlier the real content of these works is not the objects depicted or heard but the technological process of audio-visual reproduction. And, these artists isolate that process in their work, and at the same time let us see it from a distance. It is Joseph Beuys' silent piano that we understand as a device for making music because we are not transfixed by the music it is making. Likewise, we are made aware of the external speakers in Bill Viola's installation as we anticipate the next sound to emanate from them.

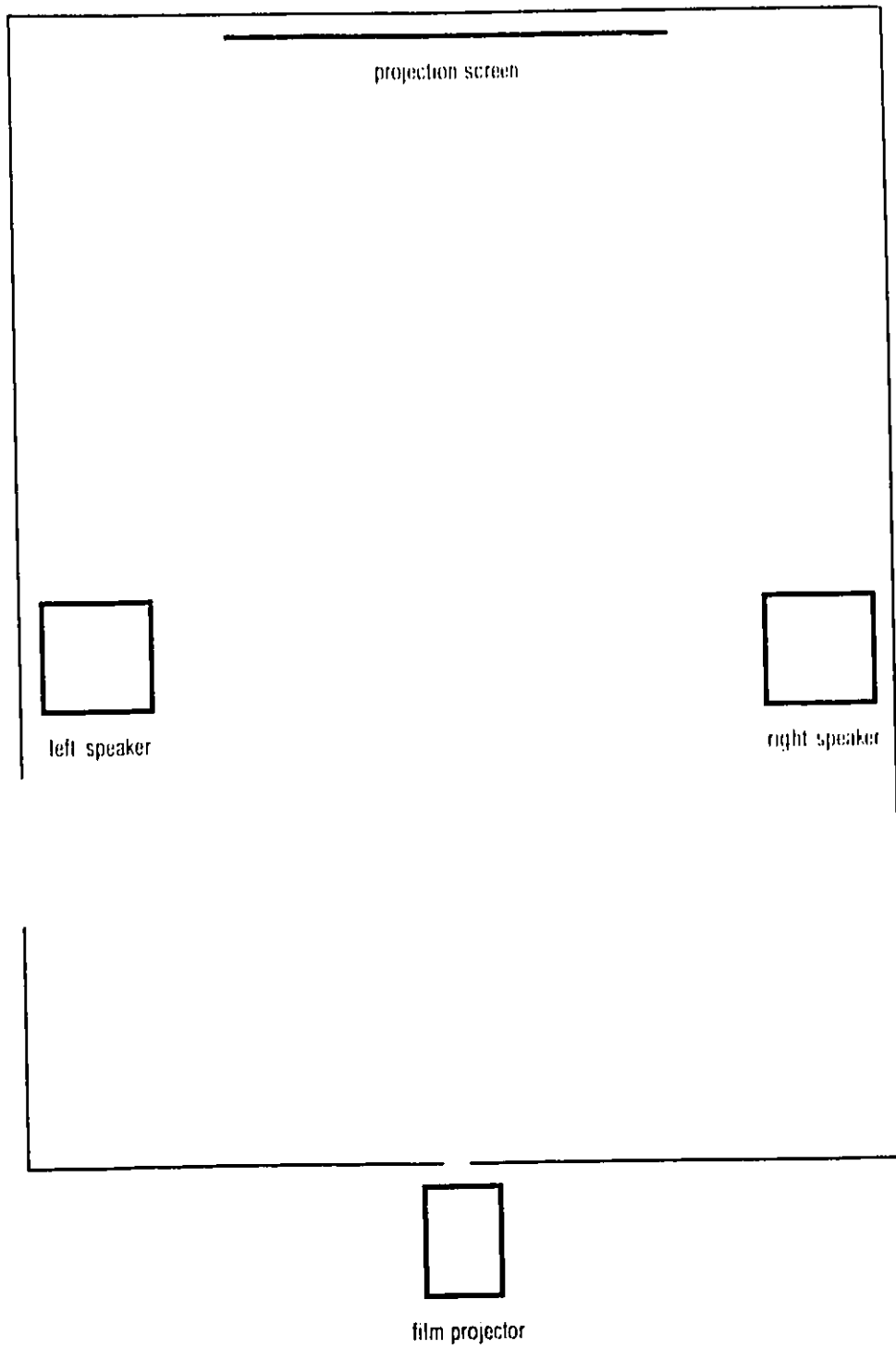
These devices do not entertain us, they do not provide us with an endless stream of information. They are distant and often silent and as such reveal themselves to us. As the works are constituted mostly by sounds and projected images the viewer cannot touch them, cannot 'consume' them and is left only to experience them in their fleeting temporality. Here these works could be said to recover Benjamin's concept of the aura. They cannot be reproduced in the sense that a photograph or video tape does not do justice to what the viewer experiences when seeing this work.

If we return to McLuhan's concept that audio–visual technologies had the potential to send 'latent' forms of experience, to transmit memories, the unconscious into a larger social paradigm we are led to consider these artists' approaches to communication technologies to understand better McLuhan's thesis. With all of this work what is being conveyed is a 'latent' form of experience: the semi–consciousness of waking in **Overture**, the state of anticipation created by the silence of **Plight**, the state of fear, created by live, loud noises in **Fugue**, by the quiet noises of another person's interior in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House**, the transience of nature and of community in **Impression D  b  cle**, and, memories, collective in **Impression D  b  cle** and **Fugue**, personal in **Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House**.

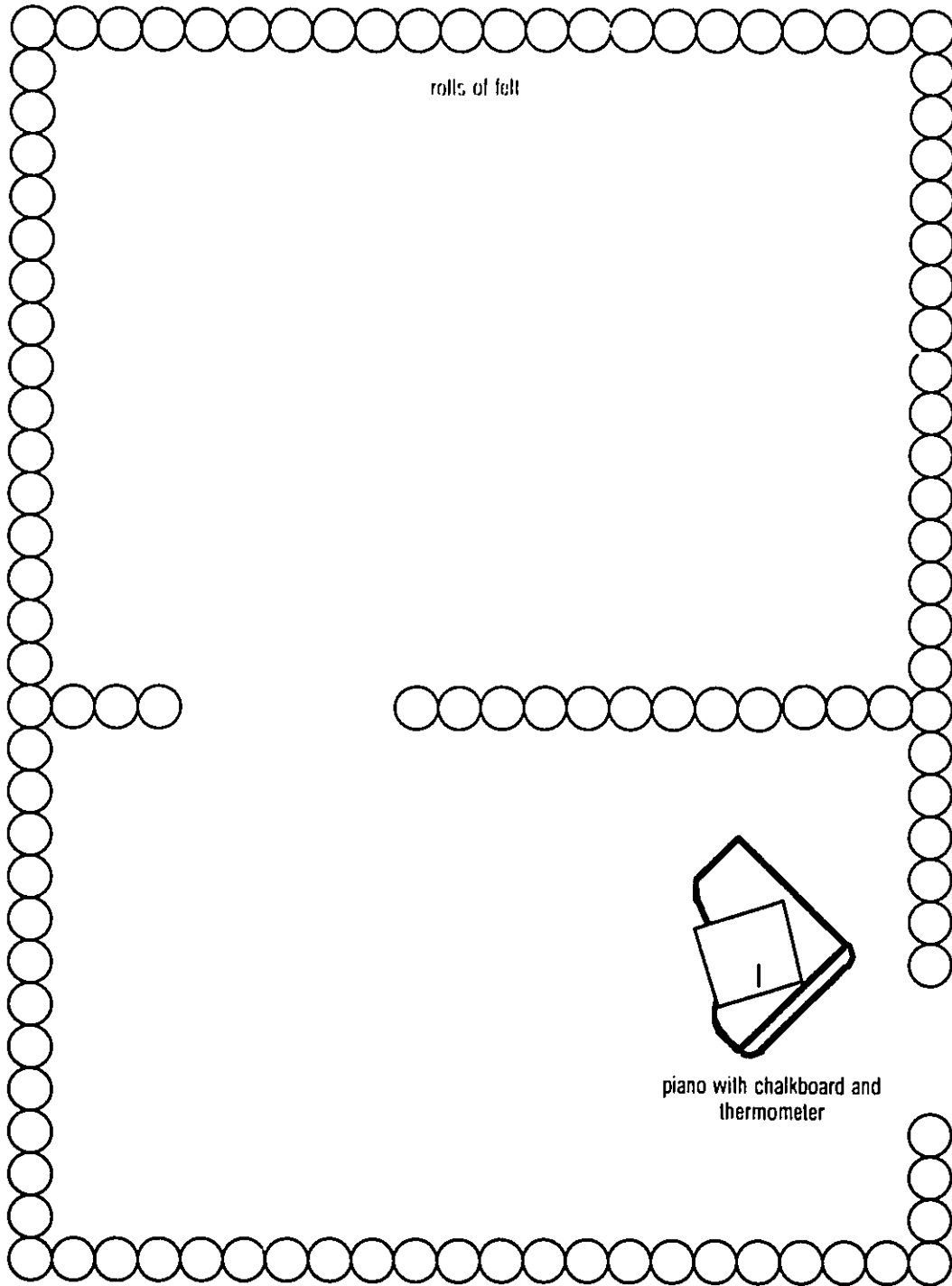
These 'latent' experiences are evoked through sound in all of these works. These are all experiences which, although they may be described, cannot be 'felt' through the visual media of text or images. The use of non–verbal sound in these works questions our dependence on language and communication to understand and experience our environment. These art

works recall to another level of communication which, Benjamin thought was lost with mass-reproduction and McLuhan would maintain, disappeared with the proliferation of the printed word.

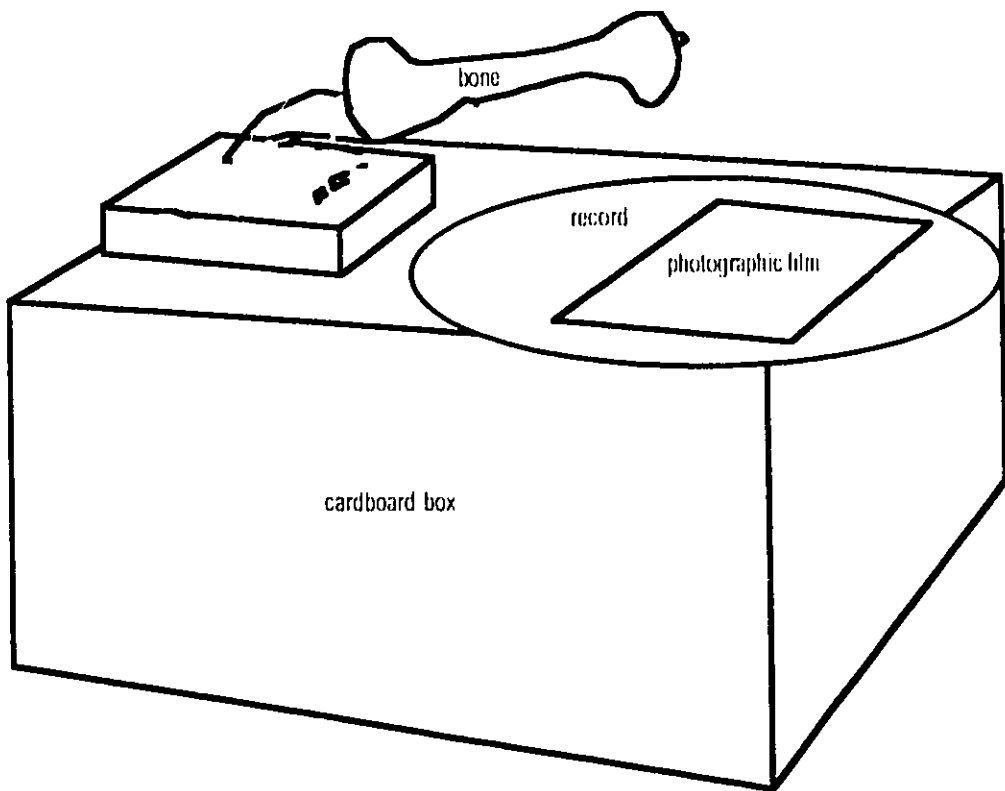
Overture - Stan Douglas



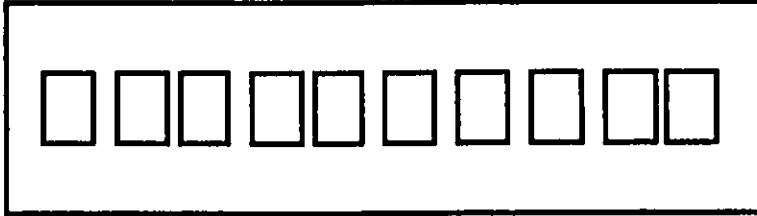
Plight - Joseph Beuys



Stummes Grammophon - Joseph Beuys



Fugue - Joey Morgan



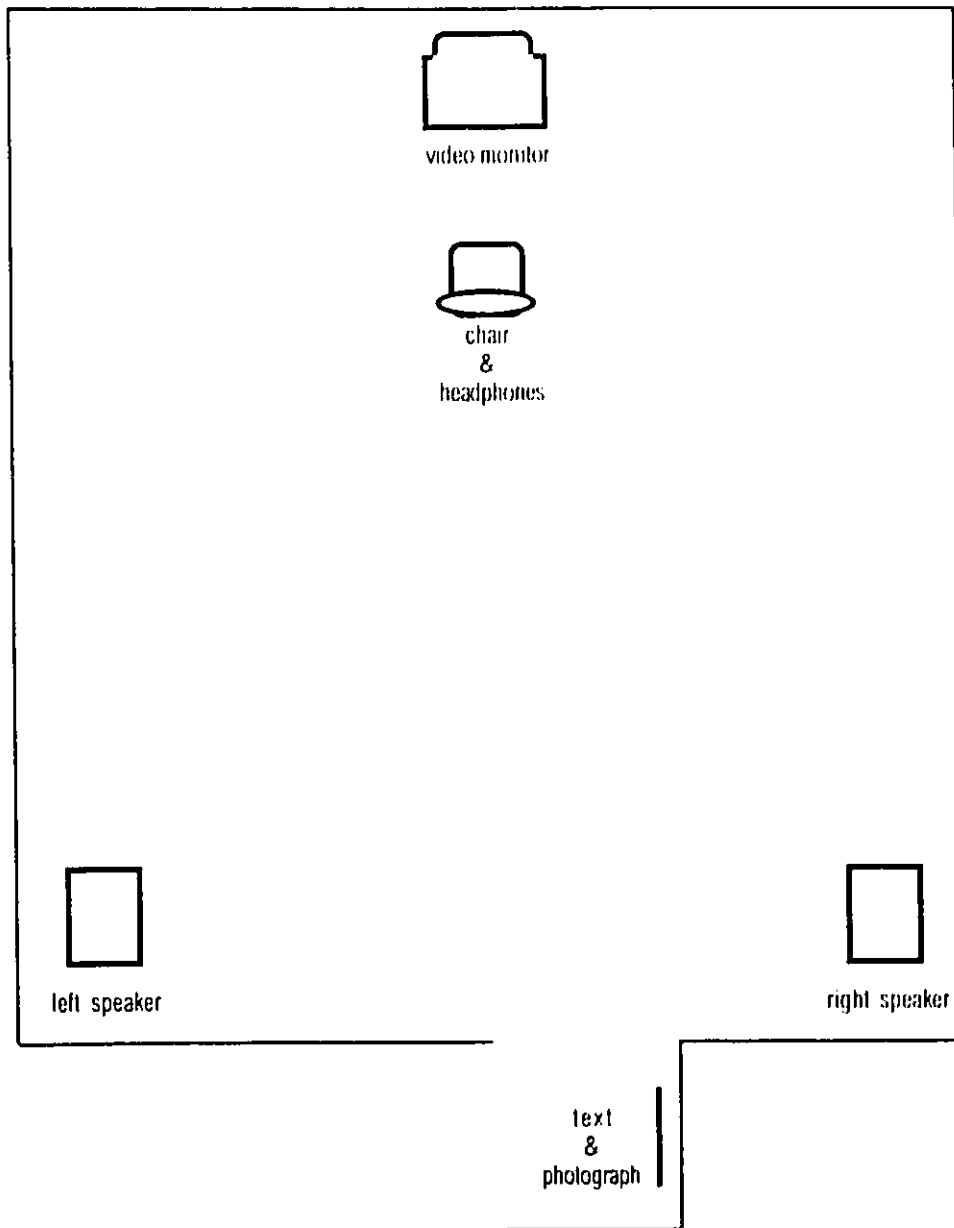
low table with ten house sculptures each containing a tiny speaker



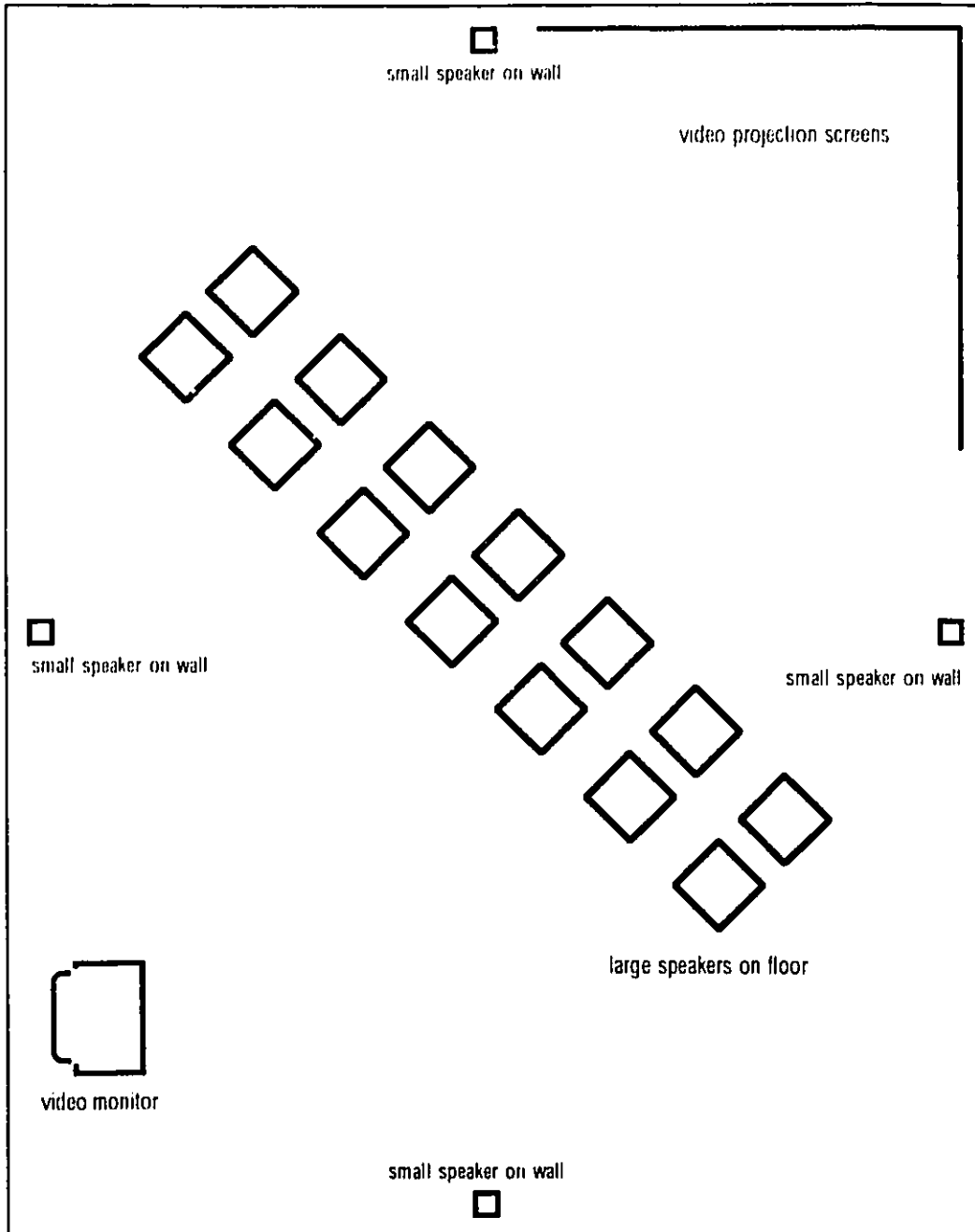
chair

abandoned warehouse at 1230 Hamilton Street
(large speakers suspended from rafters)

Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House - Bill Viola



Impression débâcle - Michèle Waquant



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