Nelly, *The Violence*, Delphi Festival (1930), black-and-white photograph. Benaki Museum, Athens

Mask Silence, Silence Masks, or A Condition of Utmost Listening

Stathis Gourgouris

If it is not here
It must be there
For somewhere and nowhere
Parallels
In versions of each other
Where/when nothing after something is not
Or even before something came to be
—Sun Ra, “Parallels” (1972)

Silence 1

The sense we have is that in the vast expanses of space between celestial bodies there is a void. Hence, total silence. The Greek word for space is *διάστημα*, which means literally in-between. It is not surprising that the word was used initially to determine the space between sounds, since the understanding of sound (and, of course, music) was essential to the ancient Greek contemplation of the universe. What Pierre Schaeffer, the founder of musique concrète, would come to call "the acousmatic experience," the ancient Greeks considered to be fundamental to physics. One listens to the universe, before anything else.

Perhaps a century from now, if humanity continues to exist on the planet, September 14, 2015, will mark the date of another sort of Copernican revolution. On that day LIGO, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory, recorded the sound of two black holes colliding about 1.2 billion years ago. LIGO is a giant listening machine focused on the outer edges of the universe: a pair of L-shaped observatories located 1,900 miles apart (in Hanford, Washington, and Livingston, Louisiana, in the United States), where ultra-pure mirrors at the end of each arm, isolated from vibrations, were set up to detect passing gravitational waves. Except that gravitational waves, until this moment, existed only in theory—Einstein's general theory of relativity that predicted, mathematically, the folding of space as a result of massive gravitational ebbs and flows. The LIGO machine registered the universe's confirmation of a human being's theory, which is based—like all theoretical physics—on the assumption that the universe works according to an unwavering mathematics, even if provisionally such mathematics are unobservable or untestable in any physical sense.

The numbers on this occasion are stunning all around, at both macro and micro levels. The energy released from the collision 1.2 billion years ago of two black holes (the size of thirty-six and twenty-nine suns each (combined to sixty-five suns), now thought to have been twins from the core of an unfathomably gigantic star) is calculated to be fifty times greater than the output of all the stars of the universe combined. This inconceivable space storm that produced a glitch in the folds of space moved the LIGO mirrors by a mere 4/1,000 of the diameter of a proton, which is itself 10^{-15} meters. The gravitational space fold produced a swishing sound moving across the range of low to middle C that lasts barely three seconds.

No matter the significance that the last part of Einstein's theoretical prediction was confirmed, the most important thing in this whole affair is this chirp. If Galileo inaugurated modern astronomy's reliance on telescopic vision now expanded across the electromagnetic spectrum, the LIGO event has changed the paradigm. As Szabolcs Marka, a Columbia University physicist who is a member of the LIGO project, put it: "Everything else in astronomy is the eye. Finally, astronomy grew ears. We never had ears before." An extraordinary realization, given that from the days of Thales and Anaximander of Miletus in the sixth century BCE the physics of the universe exceeded the visual domain. Before being the object of abstract mathematical thought, the universe is foremost an acousmatic experience. Silence is its in-between. It begs us to listen.

Masks 1

The horseshoe crab is not a crustacean. It is a marine arthropod that is closer to the arachnid family. These odd creatures live in shallow ocean waters off the eastern coast of North America and the East and South Asian seas. Because the species is 450 million years old they are considered to be living fossils. In other words, they carry with them the living history of planetary being. Horseshoe crabs have nine different eyes spread throughout their body; their visionary spectrum includes the ultraviolet range. They are veritable blue bloods because oxygen is not carried in hemoglobin but in hemocyanin, a copper-based metalloprotein. Because of anti-pathogen bacteria properties in their blue blood, horseshoe crabs are *blood harvested* (this is the phrase)—partially bled and released back into the ocean. Mortality from blood harvesting for the purposes of medical science is low but not nonexistent, while some

Horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*)

prohibitions against hunting horseshoe crabs for fishing bait have now been instituted because horseshoe crab depletion affects severely the environmental stability of migratory birds. The human animal is distinguished by its intervention in the environment of every other creature on the planet, simultaneously caring and self-serving, preservational and catastrophic.

But the human animal is also distinguished by its proclivity to wear masks, literally and figuratively—a desire that is archaic and manifested in complex institutions over a vast range of cultural traditions. Masking is a form of deceit, plainly speaking, before we get to all the sophisticated elements that lead to discussions of impersonation, theatricality, or mythical performativity. At the basic level, it is a way to deceive others as to oneself, even while provisionally suspending the very mechanism of determining a self. One might say that masking oneself is in fact a gesture of self-deception, even while it presumes to deceive the other. In his book *The Folly of Fools* (2011), the eminent biologist Robert Trivers goes so far as to argue that natural selection favors masking oneself and that deceit and self-deception, for all the havoc they presumably unleash on environmental stability, may be endemic to living being—human-being, for sure. A straightforward interaction between stable and self-assured identities is an illusion. Even when held onto with desperation or projected forth with dogmatic violence, identities are subjected to a barrage of subversive dissimulation by the very terms of society around them. In this regard, masks profess a gesture of relief. Their denial is the most transparent confirmation of their existence. When politicians declare with aplomb that "the masks have fallen," who are they deceiving but themselves?

The horseshoe crab shell is shaped like a perfect mask, with its tail even serving as a handle in the manner of a variety of mask traditions, Venetian or Javanese, Yoruba or Siberian. During early autumn on the Atlantic coast, it's common to find the endless sand covered with empty shells strewn with abandon, the result of these creatures molting (growing into new shell homes) or, in advanced age, dying. Such days I feel that I am gazing at a cemetery of discarded masks.

Petros Gourgouris, *A Tragedy* (2011), digital photograph, inkjet print, 61 x 110 cm

Mask Silence

In Cape Town, in 1973, the great South African playwright Athol Fugard, in collaboration with actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, first staged what subsequently became a famous play: *The Island*. Set on the notorious Robben Island prison, where Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years of his life, the play depicts two black prisoners who try to respond to their being condemned to a life of abusive hard labor for defying apartheid practices with the aspiration to stage, for the benefit of their fellow prisoners, the classic drama of law and defiance: Sophocles's *Antigone*.

It is based on a true story. A fellow actor in the theatrical collective The Serpent Players was arrested and imprisoned in Robben Island, where later word circulated that he had put on a performance of *Antigone* all on his own. Questions were, presumably, raised in the ranks of the collective: How can one perform ancient Greek tragedy as a soliloquy? Was the actor playing many roles simultaneously? Exchanging masks? And how was the chorus handled? Can one person speak as many and remain one? Is Antigone one? Or, conversely, is there something in Antigone that may speak like Creon? Are these two adversaries bound by a voice—*a mask*—that speaks both their tongues? Simultaneously? Even against each other? Where does "against" reside in a single voice? In the exchange of masks?

Interlude

The great innovation of Aeschylus, which produced what we call dramatic action in theater, was the breaking of the plural integrity of the chorus and the assumption of a separate voice in the presence—the mask—of one person, henceforth known as the actor. This precipitated the dramatic encounter.

No doubt, the democratic imaginary of open contestation and interrogation enabled the creation of Athenian drama, but it is equally undoubted that inherent in the form itself are the most grounded, even if otherwise intangible, characteristics of the polis as a specific form of society.

Two considerations:

In Athenian drama there is a shift from religious ritual (which, as ritual, is based on repetition) to a theatrical encounter that signals interruption and contestation, which is hard to identify as ritual per se, although the ritualistic Dionysian element of Athenian theater remains well in place. When ritual becomes drama, the song/dance performative repetition of religious worship becomes (or creates) a space where something happens, a space of action (indeed, that's what drama means). Happening, here, cannot be the mere repetition of what is known and what must be confirmed—the pattern of every mode of worship—but precisely its undoing. What happens must be performative interrogation; defamiliarization of what is expected to be repetitively confirmed; and enactment of self-reflection, which is to say inevitably, self-alienation.

Aeschylean theatricality introduces into the horizon of spectatorship (that's what theater means) a dialectical component. The chorus opens up and an individual actor is broken off, who now acts as interlocutor, as the embodied referent of action that looks away from the stage, indeed a troubling figure for the chorus's ritual integrity of body and mind. But the chorus—and this is terribly significant—is not abolished as a result. (Bourgeois theater is haunted by the failure of its presumption to abolish the chorus, a ghost that modernist and postmodernist theater in its antithesis is still struggling to overcome.) Rather, the chorus is now preserved (but altered) as itself an agent of action (a multiple actor), not merely in ritual song/dance repetition but as self-reflexive voice, in body and mind both.

Thereby, an altogether new form of inter-action on stage is created, which both represents and makes present the interaction between the play and the audience, the performance and the polis, in a profound process of unwinding self-reflection, self-interrogation, and self-alteration all around, from the stage to the street. All of this is conducted in a psycho-social atmosphere (in today's language), where the contingent elements of life are welcomed as resources instead of being feared as incapacitating obstacles. There is an acknowledged sense that this atmosphere enables even greater accountability in relation to one's actions, so that greater self-reflection and self-interrogation (the two axes of krisis*), and greater demands for self-limitation in the absence of limits, must be borne which can no longer be achieved by mere ritual.*

The Island is not a modern African version of *Antigone*. Of that there is legion, in what is a bona fide literary-historical phenomenon worthy of study and discussion. And not just of *Antigone* (although that play provides the overwhelming majority of instances), but of a number of ancient Greek tragedies brought into the contemporary African context, starting in the 1960s with the most famous initiative being Wole Soyinka's version of *The Bacchae*. This phenomenon is not about adaptation, however, or even simply translation in the broadest sense of the term. Conversely, it is a way of restaging an archaic and foreign mythical structure in a contemporary situation, where the social and political needs of decolonized African peoples for a new theatricality that would repair the broken links to their own archaic myths are actualized. Curiously, these African (and Afro-Caribbean) writers turn to the Greeks in overwhelming numbers. This is not because of the trap of Philhellenism—the constructed idealism of Greek antiquity as the cultural source of European colonial societies, where presumably an oppositional deconstruction would take place—but rather the exact opposite. There is the sense that in the mythical-theatrical universe of these ancient Mediterranean peoples something resonates as a cipher that would unlock one's own archaic structures, which colonialism has repressed into silence.

If *The Island* theatrically chronicles a mere attempt at this gesture, the ever-present threat of failure lies in ambush at every turn. Futility is a regime. The stage reality is set by the opening scene of two prisoners, literally tortured by "back-breaking and grotesquely futile labor, [as] each in turn fills a wheelbarrow and with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging and empties it. As a result, the piles of sand never diminish; their labor is interminable."

> *[This is a well-known torture tactic. In Makronisos, the Greek concentration camp for leftists during and after the Civil War, the enforced ritual was to move heavy rocks from one place of the island to another and back again, in total futility. As a result, on this arid desert island where stones reign above all, today no stone can be presumed to exist as nature.]*

Needing an against-the-grain mode of living in this hellhole of repeated abjection, these South African prisoners conceive the idea of playing (at) *Antigone* for the incarcerated public. The impetus is primarily entertainment: the paramount necessity of play (literally) in conditions of such brutality. The politics of drama arise from the reality of playing it, not from the classical content. This is the brilliance of Fugard's play, for it is all about the pains of rehearsal and the contemporary reality that authorizes the performance of the archaic. In this sense, it is unique in this genre of African renditions of Greek tragedy.

This politics of play is in essence a politics of masking the presumed reality of each one's presumed identity. Winston initially rebels at playing Antigone, fearful of being mocked by fellow prisoners for being a woman. John works hard to convince him that theater always extends itself beyond mere reality, and that the fellows in the audience know this, even if they initially laugh at the masquerade. So, "being laughed at is theater?" Winston retorts, correctly (even if unwittingly) recognizing that

Petros Gourgouris, *Dislocated* (2014), black-and-white photograph, 27.9 x 35.6 cm

theatricality entails a risk of mockery, of being taken for a fool. Wearing a mask is a *travesty* in the core sense of the term; it's a matter of cross-dressing, of turning your identity (including your sexual identity) inside out. For what is the in-and-out of your identity but the barest terms in which you clothe it, underneath which remains this inordinately pliable amorphous materiality?

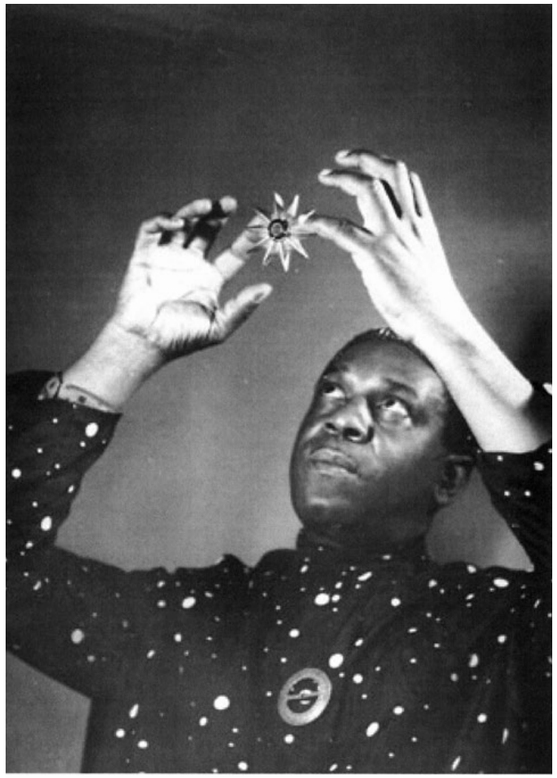
After consuming itself with the troublemaking elements of putting on a play, *The Island* concludes with a condensed performance of the Antigone–Creon dialectic that projects not the standard idealization of the defiant heroine, but rather that the two adversaries share the space of contestation—the democratic space *par excellence*. This is the radical intervention of this tragedy: to set the polis before itself in recognizing that what lends value to its internal division (between ruler and ruled, man and woman, written law and unwritten custom, authority and insurrection) is the shared space that enables everything to happen. This is a lesson, and the realization of the performance is didactic above all. Beyond the pleasure of playing at being an other, standing forth in a mask among those who have been deprived of self—to whom a mask (of race, of insurrection, of condemnation) has been imposed—means to relieve them of the burden of authenticity, and to enable them to embrace their collective otherness toward a new subjectification. Here, the mask works like silence. It opens up a space in-between.

Silence Masks

Legend has it that young pupils of Pythagoras had to spend five years in silence listening to the philosopher's words from behind a curtain (what later came to be known as the Pythagorean veil) so that the words and their meaning would resonate without interference from the image of the person speaking. Here, both masking (the veil) and silence work together to induce a condition of utmost listening. A kind of embodied understanding requires some sort of de-identification, or perhaps even depersonalization (without the pathological meaning it came to have in psychiatry), of both speaker and listener. The visual (re)presentation of authority occupies the terrain of speech and curiously disembodies it by attaching to it a face, a persona. It's quite strange indeed. For the face, the persona, is already an image discorporated from the sensuous network that retains signification as an embodied experience. This is yet another reason why masks were essential in every mode of archaic theater. While remaining a visual medium, they subverted the privileged relation of the visual to identity.

Listening, more than speaking, is essential to autonomous understanding—autonomous in its literally political sense. Indeed, more than a domain of free speech, democracy is a state of listening. From the outset, the social-imaginary of the democratic polity privileged speech metaphors—the explicit interrogation of written law, the free and fearless exchange of opinions in the marketplace (*parrhēsia*)—even if people oftentimes fell into the seductive trap of singular master-guiding oratory (demagoguery). Yet, without being configured as a space of listening, the Athenian *dēmos* would have been dysfunctional. We see this as late as the period when the Apostle Paul visited Athens in his evangelical peregrinations. As we know from what is written in The Acts, Athenians granted Paul their most attentive listening, even if they remained unconvinced by his belief in resurrection (which they found preposterous).

Like the case of Paul, the story of the Pythagorean veil is legend. It is a mythical structure whose historical authenticity is irrelevant because myth itself establishes an indisputable reality across time. And the history of the Pythagoreans is replete with legendary elements. It's not an accident. Their mystical relation to knowledge presupposes and facilitates this mythical structure. In this respect, then, the veil is just as much a metaphor for the extensively mediated structure of achieving knowledge. Knowledge is indirect and participatory. No one is a mere reception point, a vessel to be filled. Masking is a certain kind of language for this indirectness, an articulation that interrupts the need to put a face to a name. Likewise, silence too is a mask. For it enables a more profound acousmatic exchange, the



Undated photograph of Sun Ra (1970s)

kind of listening that disrupts one's reliance on mere response to external stimuli. Despite the hegemonic power of information models in contemporary thought, the human animal is not a machine. It learns by creating the knowledge situation, not by obeying it or merely responding. In fact, "[t]he astonishing thing in the human being is not that it learns but that it does not." (Castoriadis)

A great many contemporary composers relied extensively on this poetics of silence—John Cage chief among them. But I would argue this to be true of what has been called the "aesthetics of noise," which is the very opposite of silence, strictly speaking. Saturated sound, in disrupting the spacing of established harmony, creates conditions of listening that resemble the acousmatic experience of silence. When the legendary Sun Ra deemed, in the midst of the Arkestra's most far-out improvisations, that an interruption or change of direction was needed, he would give the signal for a "space chord"—a collectively improvised cluster of notes played by the full band at deafening volume. This saturated cluster was meant as an instant mood changer by mobilizing the most profound depths of listening, where listening would not mean the more conventionally understood notion of slowly developing processing of sound, but the exact opposite: a blast across the broadest range of sound that would, in a moment's notice, de-constitute any sort of habitual attachment to what had been going on in order to create an instantaneous orientation toward something else, a piercing call for attention. This call was addressed to both the musicians and the audience; it's not as if the musicians were already in the know. The acousmatic experience pertains to everyone in the room. In this case, the master (Sun Ra) need not be hidden behind a veil, since his resplendent visual presence is already constituted by means of a mythical masking that covers every aspect of his presence, including his very name and provenance.

Sun Ra may have been born Herman Poole Blount in 1914 at Birmingham, Alabama but he came from the planet Saturn. When people questioned him about the details of his birth and name, he would respond: "that's his-story; my story is my-stery." His extraordinary passage

through Planet Earth confirms this mythical stature. He famously claimed that he was sent to the planet to undo its discordant condition. And he applied himself to this task with uncanny devotion and discipline, carrying forth a dedicated group of musicians from the mid-1950s in Chicago to 1960s New York and then Philadelphia until his death. Living together in commune conditions, he and the Arkestra rehearsed nearly all hours of the day except when they were publicly performing. These were rehearsals just in name, though—or perhaps, they were in fact rehearsals for a way-of-life-to-come on a totally reorchestrated planet—because they were continuously recorded and released through an independent production network called Saturn Research, which rejected the ways of the capitalist market decades before musicians realized the importance of owning their means of production and distribution. The hundreds of discs produced in this fashion—with hand-painted covers and obscure, sometimes deliberately confusing information as to their sources and whereabouts, delivered by hand during various public performances—worked entirely within the myth-making framework of Sun Ra and his Arkestra (alternately Myth Science Arkestra, Intergalactic Research Arkestra, Solar-Myth Arkestra, Astro-Infinity Arkestra, Omniverse Cosmo Jet-Set Arkestra, et al.) as a pioneering force in what has come to be known as the movement of Afrofuturism.

Despite Sun Ra's central place in the history of jazz and his extraordinary restaging of the entire history of African-American music and beyond, it's difficult to categorize Sun Ra's music—which, to be accurate, means not just music as such, but the entire world of the Arkestra and its professed vision, the myth-making, the theatricality, the cosmological theory, and the manipulation of sound-making through the amateur construction of instruments and electro-acoustic experiments—all before they became widely practiced. Indeed, the Arkestra was, in some sense, the very practice of a way of life or arts of living as they would have been known in archaic societies. Sun Ra often commanded his musicians to play not what they knew but what they didn't know, confounding thus the very parameters of learning. In 1966, he recorded two discs of Arkestra wind musicians playing string instruments in a deliberate attempt to displace their already remarkably honed expertise under his relentless tutelage and to invite new modes of listening against the grain of what is known. In 1986, on the beach sidewalk of Coney Island, in New York, Sun Ra and John Cage, two giants of twentieth-century American experimentalism, met in a legendary sound-and-silence exchange. Sun Ra improvised on his synthesizer, switching between deafeningly scratching or crashing chords and birdlike blips and chirps (indeed, the sound recorded by LIGO of two colliding black holes creating a fold in space-time sounds very much like Sun Ra on synthesizer in what must be a perfect instance of space-justice), while Cage performed strange syllabic vocalizations from his poetry *Empty Words IV* (1974). The performance included long bouts of silence. As we have known since Cage's famous *4′33″* piece (1952), silence is a musical creation and, insofar as it takes place in real space and time, it also creates the possibility to encounter how this space-time resounds. Listening to silence is listening *through* silence.

Masks 2

In a series of poems from her book *Decreation* (2005) that she titles "Gnosticism" Anne Carson explores the underside of this term, not in its historical context in late Greek (or more precisely, Judeo-Alexandrian-Greco-Christian) thought—even though, as a scholar, she very well can—but in what the term has come to denote now: an esoteric mode of knowledge that disrupts textual authority. Whatever the voluminous literature on what exactly Gnostic heresy was in the context of early Christianity—which fails ultimately to resolve the mystery, or simply the heterogeneously constituted and geographically distended condition that bears the name—Carson is concerned more with the poetic undoing of authorized knowledge, which she nonetheless claims to reside in the knowledge-forming language itself.

In the final poem of the series, she thinks as follows:

Gnosticism IV

Walking the wild mountain in a storm I saw the great
trees throw their arms.
Ruin! They cried and seemed aware

the sublime is called a "science of anxiety."
What do men and women know of it?—at first

not even realizing they were naked!
The language knew.

Watch "naked" (*arumin*) flesh slide into "cunning" (*arum*)
snake in the next verse.
And suddenly a vacancy, a silence,

is somewhere inside the machine.
Veins pounding.

The phrase "the language knew"—standing, one may say, spatially on the navel of the poem—is the key. And the lock. Against the embodied knowledge of natural living being (the cry of trees with open arms, crackling branches, encountering the storm), the poet juxtaposes the disembodied knowledge that humans have come to bear as a result of a text that speaks of how they come to be. This text, which human animals have rendered sacred, therefore granting it the truth that disembodies their sense of self-knowledge, may be said to be itself in-the-know, in the business of knowing for-itself (*pour soi*) what makes you/me be. We are alerted to the fact that the sacred language of Genesis weaves the texture of its knowledge through a pun. In Hebrew, the word for naked or open (having no secrets) and the word for being crafty or cunning (weaving secrets) come from the same root. If God speaks/acts in Genesis he is joking. And the joke's on us—presuming that Genesis indeed generates us.

Or, it is instead the mere play of verse. A poem designates a space where language plays, where it plays tricks, so one can slide in a single instant, word to word, from one situation (where all is open and nakedness means nothing) into another situation (where nakedness is craft, a way to make things happen, an instrument).

Which is it?

"Is God a poet?" I was once asked in a public, nonacademic lecture I gave on the relation of religion to the human capacity to create forms. Unsure what to say, I answered inadvertently with what, without much thought, I think to be the case: "God is a poem."

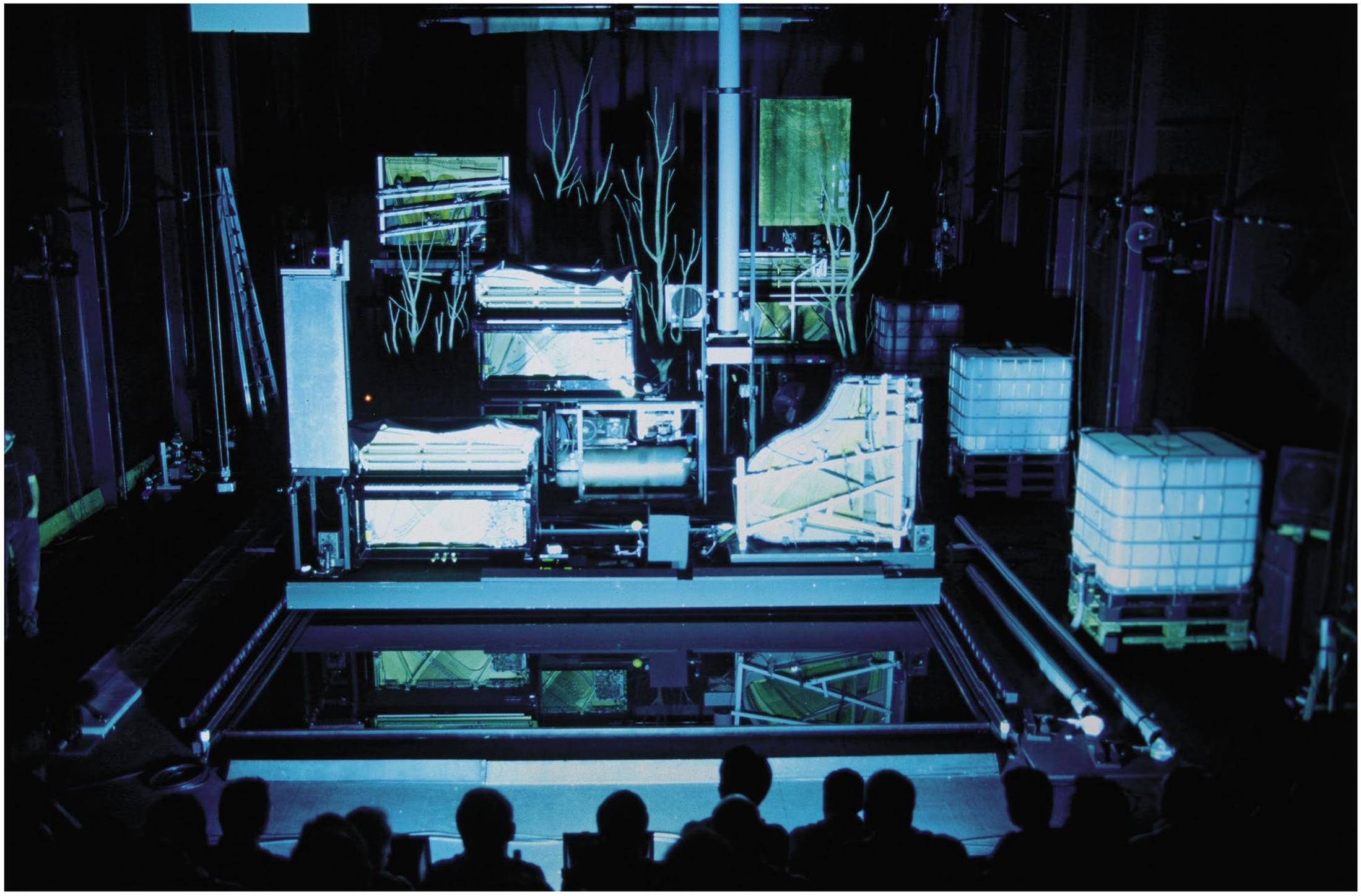
The human animal creates poems above all. Perhaps because "a vacancy, a silence, is somewhere inside the machine." Whether we presume Carson's "machine" to mean the complex cultural structure that generates profound, desperate, sublime, violence-inducing faith or we presume "machine" to mean the very depths of being, the living substance that always is but somehow, additionally, has come to know what is.

The first relegates knowledge elsewhere: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil completes the story of Creation by giving textual meaning to the flesh. But trees have no texts, even if they give their flesh so texts can be made. The second accepts that the void, this silence, resides within, even with "veins pounding." This is the esoteric knowledge (*gnōsis*) that in Carson's poetic hands *decreates*.

Silence 2

One of the greatest works of the German composer, performer, dramaturg, and sound-installation artist Heiner Goebbels is undoubtedly *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter's Things*, 2007). It is difficult to describe this "look on contemporary creation" simply as a composition or installation. Musically speaking, the chief feature of this gigantic structure of side-standing pianos—enhanced with tangles of wire, tree sculptures, assorted junk, screen projections, and motorized or computerized sound-making devices, all mounted on rails that cradle it to and fro over a foggy, bubbly, sometimes rain-drenched pool of water—might make us call it a piano piece for five pianos without pianists, or a motorized piano sculpture in a theatrical stage without actors. It has been well described as a "no-man show," in the sense that this assortment of sonic and visual materiality registers itself as a thing per se, without a body.

Goebbels constructed a mobile assembly of images and sounds that manifest themselves autonomously, in a profound attempt to make



Heiner Goebbels, *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter´s Things*, 2007)

perceptible their synesthetic thingness unimpeded by performative agency. Of course, whatever might be noted as "agency"—human intervention—is made internal to the thing in what is a strange reversal of embodiment. The three-dimensionality of the sound event, if this can be said, is such that the typically disembodied human element (the artist's hand, eye, voice) that's always embedded in the art object is curiously subordinated, or assimilated, in the *autonomy* of the piece itself—and it is rare how literally the word "autonomy" figures in this case. Recent stagings have created more of an installation than performance atmosphere where spectator-audiences can literally enter the ins and outs of the multiple sculptural space.

In the historical background of this autonomous thinghood issuing forth resides the figure of Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868), an Austrian writer whose vision of nature exceeds even the typically hyperbolic tendencies of the Romantics toward artifice. An extensive reading of Stifter's descriptions of the forest in frosty winter, where nature shines as the creation of splendorous language, comes to encounter ethnographic recordings of indigenous songs from Papua New Guinea and Greek islanders welcoming refugees from Asia Minor in the 1930s (the resonance with today is uncanny), plus sound snippets of Claude Lévi-Strauss, William S. Burroughs, and Malcolm X in a collage of voices that alert us, each in its own way, to the dire intervention of the "human machine" upon planetary thingness itself. The artist does not extricate himself from this condition, for he has built a Romantic machine for an age whose modernity may be irreparably indebted to the vicissitudes of Romantic thinking but may equally be said to be presiding over the extinction of the radical force of the Romantic imagination. Nothing more to discover, proclaims the resigned French anthropologist.

Much of what this sound event consists of is the register of a range of social-historical material whose living force has been silenced. I don't mean to suggest that it is engaged in some sort of archaeological redemption. It isn't concerned with performing excavations, bringing back voices. The depiction of its material is brutal. Borrowing from the lexicon of Heiner Müller, with whom Goebbels often collaborated, the five pianos that yield every bit of their wood-and-wire bodies to motorized manipulations bring forth a landscape in ruins. This does not diminish the work's beauty, the sheer awe it inspires, the peace it induces through pianissimo peregrinations across the luscious descriptions of Stifter's forest, Burroughs's wrath against the capitalist buying and selling of bodies and souls, or Malcolm X's calm conviction alerting us to the fact that positions and definitions have changed.

Admittedly an act of deceleration of time, *Stifters Dinge* too is a work of *decreation*. Pianos speak, by analogy, like gravitational waves from bodies (celestial, animate, or mechanical) coming into contact, by collision and friction, by being drawn into a vortex of synesthetic material coexistence and spewed out again in the ebb and flow of what resounds and is silenced. If the universe resists the mark of total silence, except in its in-between, the *διάστημα* of its space, it is pressed upon us to confront, as animals that feed on phantasms above all, that we go to great lengths to impose silence all around. To silence constituencies of others for the sheer fact of wielding dominance; to silence ourselves for the sheer fact of embracing cowardice. Imposed silence, landscape in ruins. This sort of silence is the exact opposite of what Buddhists assume in order to listen deeper to the cosmos. It's not just imposed silence; it is also imposed deafness. For what keeps breathing under the brutality of this imposition, as the slightest caressing of the air of spirit-matter against matter, breath against leaf, does not ever stop calling for us to listen; discordant brush against the flow in perfect circulation.

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