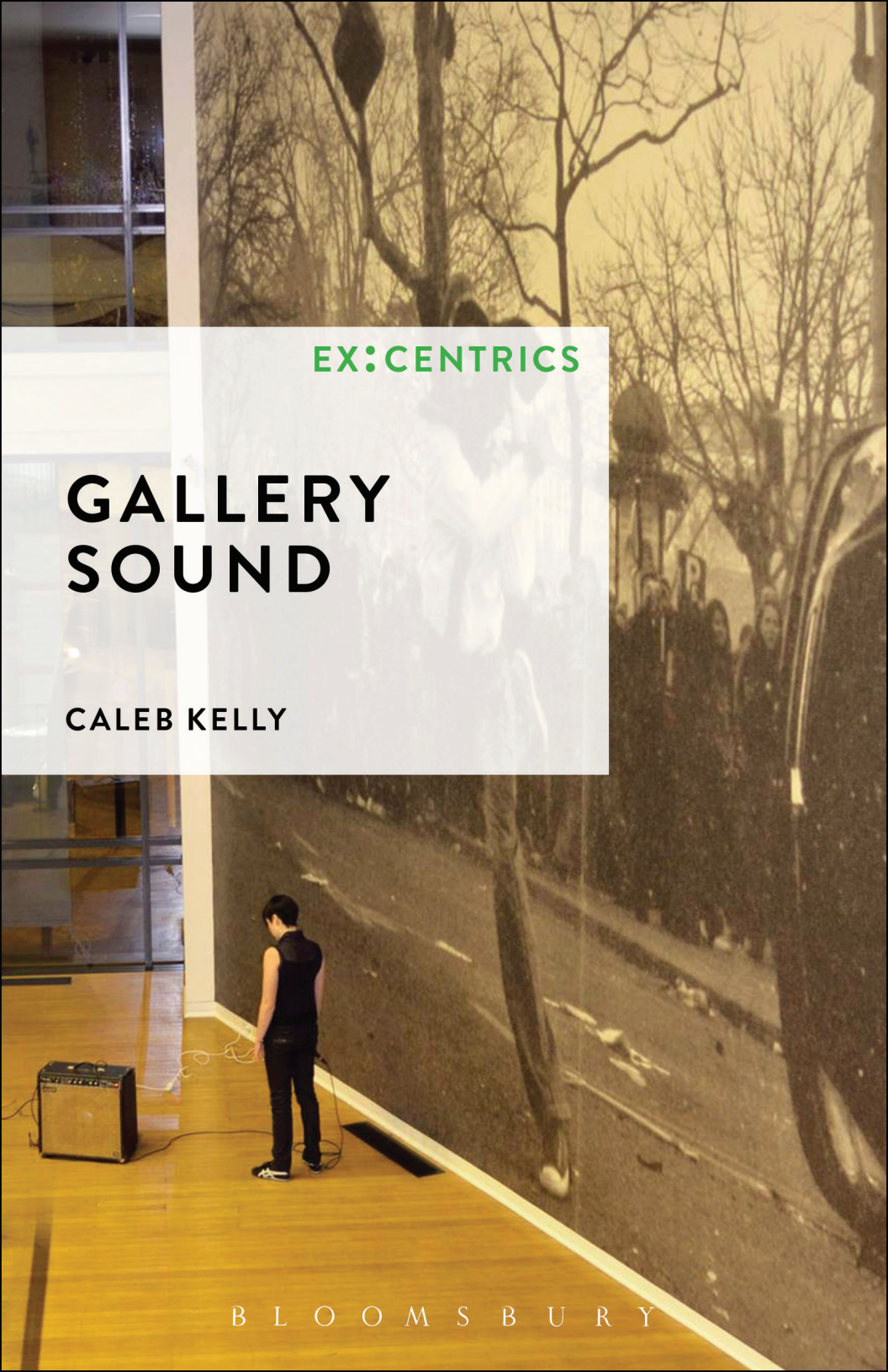
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Gallery Sound

ex:centrics

Series Editors:
Greg Hainge and Paul Hegarty

Gallery Sound

Caleb Kelly

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Cover image ©: Kusum Normoyle in performance for the opening of Sound Full (2012) in front of Marco Fusinato, Reproduction of *Double Infinitive 2* (2012). Courtesy of the artist. Photograph Brodie Thompon

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The research process as a whole and the development of ideas into this book developed out of a surprising series of twists and turns, dead ends and moments of unexpected joy. I have spent the last twenty years with my head deep in sound in art and music; it saturates my workday and my spare time. This book is a product of having sonic interest in the arts both as an academic and as an event producer/curator who has extensively exploited the gallery space as a site for the production of soundful happenings. Within these various practices the gallery has taken numerous forms, from artist-run spaces to art museums and the events themselves are numerous in type from noise music festivals to biennale events, all has taught me something about sound within the gallery.

More specifically the book has had a rather long gestation; back in 2010 it first surfaced as an attempted Australian Research Council grant application. It was with some surprise that the editors of the ex:centrics series a few years later invited me to propose a book that was very similar in scope to my initial proposal. I was delighted to write the book and so thanks needs to be directed to Greg Hainge and Paul Hegarty for having faith in this book project.

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Introduction

Australian artist Marco Fusinato's installation *Constellations* (2015) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore, is an extraordinary installation, largely because it could potentially be the loudest work ever installed in an art gallery. The gallery itself is typical in that it has long white walls, a polished concrete floor and industrial ceiling fittings. Clean, white and empty, for the most part the only discernible sound within the space is the clicking footsteps of patrons. A 46-metre-long wall bisects the expansive exhibition space. The wall has been beautifully constructed and looks as if it is a permanent fixture. Attached to the wall is a long metal chain connected to a baseball bat, the only visible object present within the gallery. The audience for *Constellations* is tasked with striking the wall with the bat, a rather strange thing to expect anyone to do. As could be expected from an artist so inextricably linked to noise, there is a catch to the violent thump of bat on wall; the strike causes 120 decibels of sound to blast out from inside the wall. The sound is on the pain threshold and is louder than most rock concerts and the equivalent to that of a chainsaw.

When the exhibition began, the wall was pristine, but by the end of the exhibition it had been severely damaged with large chunks now 'missing' and chipped paint hanging off its surface. In documentation of the installation people can be seen with bat in hand, throwing themselves at the wall, hitting it as hard as they can (so much so that a rule of one hit per person was eventually introduced). In fact, in the first days of the exhibition four wooden baseball bats were snapped, causing the artist to replace them with an aluminium bat. There is something quite peculiar in the act of striking the gallery wall, the apparent strangeness and humour in the action is met with a brutal torrent of white noise that is both terrifying and comical. The sound generated by the strike intervenes in the expected norms of gallery conduct and in the unspoken expectation for quiet within the art institution.

The audio produced from the clout emanates from a sizeable sound system installed within the wall. Contact microphones were placed around the strike zone such that when the bat made contact with the wall, the microphones would pick up the sound produced, sending the signal to the sound system where they were massively amplified. The work cannot help but raise ethical issues around the health and safety of those subjected to the torrent of sound. The installation has drawn questions in public talks I have given of how a work this loud, possibly dangerously loud, could be presented in a public environment? Interestingly the exhibition did not generate a single noise complaint and many audience members returned numerous times, for instance to let off steam between classes (the gallery being located within an art school). In general, far quieter sounds within the bounds of other art galleries have drawn complaints in the past, but not the sonic blasts generated by *Constellations*.

Constellations makes use of the gallery architecture to its fullest. The hard floors, flat walls and all but empty space are palpably filled, albeit for brief moments at a time, with sound pressure and reverberating air. If this was not enough, the installation room's 'noise floor' (the sum of all noise sources within a system, here the gallery) was dramatically heightened for a full day when Fusinato performed a six-hour version of his guitar noise performance work *Spectral Arrows*. The art museum installed a disproportionately large sound system, including two bass guitar amps, alongside a sound system that would fill a concert venue with audio. With only a relatively small number of visitors in the gallery at any one time over the course of the performance, sound was not dampened by the bodies of the audience as would occur with larger numbers in attendance. Thus sound ricocheted around the room, reinforcing itself and raising the air pressure even further. The reverberation within the gallery was consequently extreme, causing Fusinato's thick and multilayered noise music to fold in on itself over an extended duration.

a Listening to visual art

Sounds fill the gallery spaces of the art world. Upon entering almost any contemporary gallery space, we hear sound emanating from TV monitors, projection spaces, computers and in headphones,

alongside the daily sounds made by gallery staff, art patrons, the gallery bookshop and so on. The gallery is not the hushed space it was once imagined to be, but filled with noisy, quiet, disruptive, overlapping, discrepant, loud, brutal, pretty, aggressive and/or harmonious sounds. This is not unproblematic as the hard, square surfaces of the gallery do not manage sound well; instead of remaining localized, sounds are reflected all around the space, bumping into other sounds that have crept out of adjoining galleries and interfering with each other in the process. In addition, many contemporary practices stage the gallery as a social space, somewhere we have conversations, eat, drink and participate. Well-known examples of such practices include Rirkrit Tiravanija's *untitled (free)* (1992) in which participants ate rice and Thai curry cooked by the artist, and Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) installed in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall for which visitors attended numerous times creating a social space within the art museum.

To begin with, compare two very different environments employed for the display of audiovisual work: the cinematic theatre and the art gallery. The former is dark, plush and comfortable; the latter is white, stark and unforgiving. Andrew Uroskie, in his book *Between the Black Box and the White Cube*, details the differences: 'Within the gallery's brightly illuminated container, the aesthetic spectator navigates a physical encounter with the space of the object-come-installation in a temporality of their choosing. The cinema's box, by contrast, intentionally negates both bodily mobility and environmental perception so as to transport the viewer *away* from her present time and local space' (Uroskie 2014, 5).

The contemporary cinema was created for viewing moving images and listening to highly produced audio, while the gallery space was created for viewing visual art. The cinema attempts to lull us into forgetting our physical presence in the theatre, while the art gallery constantly alerts us to the fact that we are looking at art and that we are present. The venues for film and contemporary art have a relatively short history, but the rationale behind these architectures demonstrates an approach that was very different from what was originally envisaged to be presented within these spaces.

Art was not always presented single file in stark white galleries; not very long ago, pictures were stacked high on the wall in the grand salons across Europe. However, in the last century or so, art has

become singular, requiring space and an environment that is cleaned of visual impairment. There is a strong desire for an uninterrupted line of sight and, as a result, the white cube is the cleanest and most obvious choice. In this logic, sound was simply not conceived as a condition of these visual art spaces. Steven Connor, a historian of sound, voice and auditory media, in his essay 'Ears Have Walls', points to the difficulty of exhibiting sound in galleries, arguing that galleries have been formed to highlight visuality, their sharp angles designed for visual rather than sonic containment: 'Sound work makes us aware of the continuing emphasis upon division and partition that continues to exist even in the most radically revisable or polymorphous gallery space, because sound spreads and leaks, like odour' (Connor 2011, 129).

The harsh, hard surfaces of the gallery ignore the multitude of technologies designed over the last century to curb the diffusion of sound. In her book *The Soundscape of Modernity*, Emily Thompson, a historian of technology, highlights the radical transformation of our sonic environments, beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, which were shaped by scientific methods for controlling sound. Thompson attests, 'A fundamental compulsion to control the behaviour of sound drove technological developments in architectural acoustics' (Thompson 2002, 2), for example, by changing the reverberation time of a room by curbing the way sound moved through a given space. Thompson's argument is that sound was controlled and shaped in a technologically driven and modernist manner, most distinctly within the developing cinema theatres, while elements of sound behaviour such as reverberation were removed altogether. Next time you are at the cinema take note of how this practice continues to form our movie-going experience. The soft coverings on the floors, walls and chairs are there to dampen the sound by lessening sound reflection. In addition to rendering the space as a listening capsule, cinema developed playback technologies such as 5.1 surround sound that creates an immersive sound, further suturing us into the cinematic experience. As we will see in the following pages, this is radically different from the gestation of the art gallery and its development into the white-walled container of contemporary art.

Gallery Sound has its gestation within my history as an event producer and curator who has extensively employed the art gallery as a venue for exhibition and for the performance of music. The

ideas found in this book were originally generated within a practice that sought to utilize a problematic architecture and interior design to promote soundful arts practices. However, this book is not about the inherent problems or issues with curating within the art gallery; this is definitely not a how-to manual. Rather this is a book that listens back to the gallery space, hearing afresh an environment that is always already brimming with sonic artefacts, a space that is never silent.

In the early 1950s, American experimental composer John Cage argued explicitly for the impossibility of silence, arguing that 'silence is all of the sound we don't intend', and 'there is no such thing as absolute silence' (Kahn 1999, 163). Cage created a piece of very noisy silence entitled *4′33″* (1952) in the process of considering this impossibility of absolute silence. The work at first might seem to be about silence since the performer of the piece sits silently without playing a note on their instrument for the duration of the piece. For the premiere it was David Tudor in front of a grand piano, but in fact the composition actually frames listening and all the sounds that occur during its performance. What is garnered from listening to the piece is that silence is anything but silent and that within the time frame of the performance all manner of sounds can be heard. For Douglas Kahn, a historian of the sounding arts, *4′33″* was the 'ultimate *silent piece*' (italics in original), which 'could occur anywhere and anytime, all sounds could be music, and no one need to make music for music to exist' (163).

If sound is ever present, then it follows from this that art galleries contain sound and therefore are never silent. Sound is present in the gallery in numerous ways, whether in everyday sounds, in incidental or deliberate sound, in extremely loud or imperceptibly quiet sounds, or in the conversations and imagination of the audience. It is crucial in reading *Gallery Sound* that the reader understands that I am taking Cage at his word: that there really is no such thing as silence, not in a landscape painting, not in a marble sculpture and certainly not in an art gallery. Artworks already and always come with and are immersed in sound. The architecture of the gallery is filled with sounds, images fill our minds with sound, the acoustic space of the gallery is transformed by installations and sometimes works produce sounds themselves. By listening closely to the sounds of the art gallery, both literally and in our imagination, from within the art and incidentally to the art, we will comprehend art in a

richer and fuller manner, one that can take into account the full spectrum of our human perception.[1]

Silence, it would seem, can never be silent. A series of installations of not quite silent silences was installed at Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia (curated by Robert Blackson). For this series artists were commissioned to produce a work that responded to a particular kind of silence. For this series Ann Hamilton, Sophie Calle, Autumn Chacon and Cornelia Parker were commissioned to produce works that 'alter the assumed silence of the gallery by adding additional layers of commissioned silences to the space' (Blackson 2016). Sophie Calle worked with the silence that occurred for five minutes across the entire Domino's Pizza chain in America during the OJ Simpson trial verdict, during which time not a single pizza was ordered throughout the chain in the United States. To register this (non)event, she recorded her silence in an actual Domino's Pizza kitchen. Cornelia Parker's silence, entitled *Sitting Thinking About Explosions in a Small Quiet Room* (2012), is a recording of her doing just that. This work has itself been released as a record on which is recorded the sounds in the room in which Parker was sitting while thinking about the extremely loud sounds of explosions. Parker is most well known for her installations such as *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991) that halt time in the course of an explosion by suspending objects in space. The artist's imagining of explosions can then be heard within the frame of a 'sonic imagination' that continues her investigation of very loud moments in time.

These performances of silence that played silently into the art gallery are a reflection on the assumed quietude of the exhibition environment on the one hand and the expectation that a sounding work is not silent on the other. The installations hardly affected the gallery environment, playing well below the noise floor and deliberately attracting very little attention, silently going about their performance in the background of the louder regular programmed exhibitions.

There is a complex relationship to silence within the setting of the art gallery that bumps up against the impossibility of actual silence within any environment. The quietest places on earth are those located within the architectural structures known as anechoic chambers, with Microsoft's chamber at Redmond in Washington being the quietest. This research facility has officially recorded

decibel levels of –20.6 dB (the theoretically quietest possible measurement being –23 dB) (Microsoft 2015). As will be discussed later, the anechoic chamber has been influential on artists interested in experiential practices and it was a key driver in the development of John Cage's thinking about silence and it was a technology later used by American artists Robert Irwin and James Turrell to create sensory deprivation that caused those inside to experience their sense of hearing in a heightened manner. In the hands of these artists the lack of sensory experience becomes the art itself, shifting so-called visual art into the realms of the senses.

I could include here numerous quotations that point to an insufficient understanding of sound as it pertains to visual art. To take but one example from 2015: 'Sound installation remains under-recognized within historical accounts of twentieth-century art and music' (Ouzounian 2015, 73), writes Gascia Ouzounian, a musicologist and sound artist, but many similar claims are repeated regularly in contemporary literature focused on sound. As far back as 1990, Kahn named the twentieth century 'the deaf century' (Kahn 1990), pointing to a history of art investigation that almost completely negated sound as a component of so-called 'visual art'. At this stage in the burgeoning disciplines of sound research we have most likely reached a point where these types of statements should no longer be necessary, but sound remains a concern within art discourses because it continues to be insufficiently acknowledged and theorized within the realm of the so-called visual arts. Sound in art is too often, as the above quotation suggests, under-recognized, but even when it is recognized this is often done inadvertently. For example, many reviews and discussions of the work of Dan Flavin discuss the electrical sound produced by his fluorescent lights, and it is a fact that his works produce a constant electrical buzz. Yet Flavin is never called a sound artist and his works are not discussed as sound installation even if they are regularly discussed in relation to the sound they produce. This is critical to the logic of this book, a point of departure that is generative rather than a point of negation. That is, we do not need to create a special category for sound in art as it is always and forever present. What we do need to do is to become more aware of the environment in which art is displayed and the simple fact that we perceive our art, and the world in which we are in, through all of our senses.