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Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7wt7z8mx

Journal
Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 3(1)

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Publication Date
2020

DOI
10.5070/R73151224

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Douce Mélancholie: Sonic Negotiations of Absence in the Works of Susan Philipsz and Félicia Atkinson

Jenny Wu

On July 5, 2019, the French composer, poet, and publisher Félicia Atkinson released an experimental album titled *The Flower and the Vessel*. On September 16, 2019, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, Missouri, opened the exhibition *Susan Philipsz: Seven Tears*.[1] By reflecting on these two contemporary sonic events through the lens of affect theory, this essay aims to explore the embodied experience of absence.

Trace

Of the seven works by Turner Prize–winning sound artist Susan Philipsz to visit St. Louis, one was made specifically for the Pulitzer, while the six others, including the eponymous work, *Seven Tears* (2019) (Figure 1), had been previously commissioned. Philipsz's ambient and minimal 2019 iteration of *Seven Tears*, whose sound travels through the Pulitzer Arts Foundation's Main Gallery down to the Lower South and Lower East Galleries and into the courtyard, is a deconstruction of John Dowland's *Lachrimae* (1604). Philipsz isolated seven individual notes from Dowland's *pavane* and reproduced these notes by rubbing her finger over the rims of water glasses. Each note was then recorded and projected from one of seven

Figure 1 Philipsz, Susan. Seven Tears*, 2019. Installation View. Pulitzer Art Foundation, MO. Image courtesy of Alise O'Brien, September 16, 2019.*

turntables in the gallery space. For context, Dowland's *Lachrimae* "opens with seven *pavans*," a *pavan* being a slow processional dance originating in Italy. Each *pavan* is a variation of the *Lachrimae* motif—lachrima being Latin for "tear." "The sequence of four descending diatonic notes (A-G-F-E)," writes Anna Sophia Schultz, the curator of Ludwig Forum Aachen, where *Seven Tears* was previously installed, "describes the rise and fall of a tear, forming in the eye, swelling into full size, tipping out of the eyeball, and flowing down the cheek."[2]

Aachen is a German city known for its hot springs, which suffered damage during the Second World War.[3] When *Seven Tears* was installed in St. Louis, the motif of water drew attention to the city's recent flooding, as well as to the perils of climate change broadly speaking.[4] In both cases, the work provided a space and a prompt for the participants' self-reflection.[5] Through sound and reference, *Seven Tears* brings past and present into conversation. Through the work's associations with water—tears, sorrow, and evaporation—it participates in an exchange between cities across the world.

Philipsz's sound installations traffic in minimalist language: the staging is straightforward, the sound calls attention to itself, without being overbearing. The sonic landscape, writes Jacob Fabricius, "makes most people more aware of the

place they are situated in. If not for a day, a month, or a year, then at least the train of thought is broken for a split second."[6] Undergirding the sonic landscape is a dense web of historical associations, but the work's full affect is produced through disassembling these references, through the fragmenting of the past, and through the denial of the whole.

During the seventeenth century, Dowland's *Lachrimae* became popular in English society as a symbol of a "'specifically modern, deliberately cultivated melancholy,' which was labeled a 'fashionable complaint' . . . or 'English malady.'"[7] In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton "accords music a special role in melancholy, with its particular capacity of 'delivering from and sustaining this ambivalent, wistfully-sweet sentiment.'"[8] Melancholy as "sentiment," or what we now know as "affect," is further described in Schultz's essay as follows:

> Melancholy was triggered by themes such as "mutability and death" and precisely [in *Seven Tears*] it preserves the peculiar ambivalence between sorrow and joy, expressed in phrases like "the joy of grief," "*douce mélancholie* [sweet melancholy]," and "*Wonnen der Wehmut* [the wins of sadness]," which extend across different cultures and centuries.[9]

Using this cultural context as a starting point, I interrogate whether the "melancholia" of *Seven Tears* originates in its internal relations or externally to the work.

A formal analysis of *Seven Tears* might start like this: seven turntables rotate mechanically on seven pedestals, which are dispersed across a gallery with white walls and polished cement floors. Each turntable projects one note. The sound is persistent but hardly louder than the noise one might hear while riding a train. Conversations in the gallery space are still audible. The notes are played on a loop; they have not been manipulated or synthesized. The participant traverses the gallery by walking through or around the scattered turntables and is permitted to step close to the pedestals.

The seven notes projected through the room are G#-A-B-C-C#-D-E, although, immediately the "trace" presents itself: other notes *can* be heard or, more aptly, constructed in the sonic overlaps of the existing notes. The sound is centered on a motif of three notes: the middle A, the middle B, and the middle C. Compact, pitch-wise, but sequentially played, one after another and each one enunciated, given its own full breath—A, then B, then C—signaling a minor scale and keeping mysterious which one (natural, harmonic, or melodic). The A does seem to be the tonic, as the scale always starts anew on the A. No matter at what point in the sequence the participant enters the Pulitzer's Main Gallery, it is evident that the

lingering A-B-C is the grounding motif from which the rest deviates. The deviations come gradually: the D that comes in place of the C, the G# that leads into A. The range of available pitches expands incrementally. First the D, then the lower G#. Or first the G# and then, a long while later, the higher D. Participants, depending on when they begin to listen, are allowed a degree of freedom in their exploration within the space opened up by the work: they may not hear the elusive C# or the high E.

The notes played are within a range of eight semitones, as though confined to a narrow tunnel, but meanwhile, there are overtones at work, a very high B here, a very low C# there, sustained in the gallery space. The C# strikes one at times as a ghostly rumble, at times as an insistence on a major key, a false major within the predominant minor. The E arrives, the highest of the seven notes, to feign a moment of clarity, one that still refuses to disclose the identity of the minor key. The work asks its participants to engage with chromaticism—in other words, notes that do not fit well into an established key signature—rather than with chords. However, the overtones make it difficult to inhibit one's perception of chords.

Sweet Melancholy

A formal analysis can tell us how *Seven Tears* works on a technical level and can reveal the piece's internal relations, but such an analysis insufficiently describes the work that *Seven Tears* performs on the participant. The affect theorist Sara Ahmed's essay "Happy Objects" explores the possibility of a positive—"happy"—experience of melancholy, a positive affect generated by a melancholic environment. The framing of *Seven Tears* is ambivalent because the participant is instructed to read melancholia into an otherwise highly aestheticized space designed to produce a positive affect. Ahmed writes, "Bad feelings are seen as oriented toward the past, as a kind of stubbornness that 'stops' the subject from embracing the future," whereas "good feelings" are associated with movement and openness.[10] If scenes from the past can intervene in the present, it would follow that "bad" and "good" feelings may be triggered simultaneously. In Philipsz's work, traces of histories, and specifically violent histories, which could be relegated to the domain of "melancholia"—that which is already gone, that which can no longer hold power over us[11]—enter the present by way of the uncanny sound.

The authors of "An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers: Félix Guattari on Affect and Refrain," Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie, argue that we do not have to feel a specific emotion—happiness, anger—in order for refrains and "affective modulation" to work on us.[12] They write:

> It is often forgotten that refrains are not just closures but openings to possible change. . . . Refrains join with future forces by stitching themselves into them. They are able to do this because affects, as transitions or passages, are able to link up across senses, across events, across "temporal contours," between or within different aspects of refrains.[13]

Affect is a slippery concept, one that is difficult to define, though it is often used interchangeably with words like *emotion* and *feeling* to describe the way in which external environments inadvertently get *into* subjects. As a whole, definitions of "affect" require metonymic devices to imitate the workings and behavior of this elusive concept. For Kathleen Stewart, author of *Ordinary Affects*, "Affect is the commonplace, labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being. It hums with the background noise of obstinacies and promises, ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points."[14] "Affect" is a theory based on sensation, oscillation, and innuendo, wherein the body, or its sensing organs, has become both the subject of and the vessel for the workings of art.

In 1980 the German researchers Hertha Sturm and Marianne Grewe-Partsch conducted an experiment that exposed sixty-two Viennese schoolchildren to the film *Bibi Bitter and the Snowman* and recorded their responses. Sturm and Grewe-Partsch's experiment was a watershed moment for what is now known as affect theory. The participants in the experiment were shown three versions of a film in which a man makes a snowman and, upon realizing the snowman will melt, takes the snowman to the top of a mountain and leaves it there.

In the first version, the film contained only noise and music; in the second, a voice described the situation as it happened ("Bibi built a snowman, he lived with the snowman"); in the third, the voice narrated the emotions within each scene ("Bibi was very happy living with his snowman"). The experiment hinged on the distinction between noise and music, voice description, and narrativizing. The data was collected with a dial that the children turned (self-reporting) and with Galvanic skin monitors. In the end, the version with only noise and music won as "the most pleasant," with second place given to the subtler—less heavy-handed—objective description. Furthermore, the study showed a correlation between "sad" or melancholy visual stimulus and positive feelings and enjoyment: "The 'sad' scenes were rated the *most pleasant*; the sadder the better."[15]

Sturm and Grewe-Partsch's findings speak not only to how affect precedes reason but also to the ambivalence of certain affective responses, such as when a subject reports having a positive experience of a negative emotion.[16] We can

consider what these findings mean for contemporary art and its relation to society, politics, and history. The affective potential of noise—of "sound art," as opposed to traditional, language-centered forms of dispensing affect, like a voice telling a story—points to the affective potential of absence. Brian Massumi writes in *Parables for the Virtual*, "Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology"—and what we consider contemporary art has a role to play in these renegotiations—"for although ideology is still very much with us, often in the most virulent of forms, it is no longer encompassing. It no longer defines the global mode of functioning of power. It is now one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology."[17]

In the book *Music, Sound, and Multimedia*, Jamie Sexton quotes Brendon LaBelle's definition of sound art as a conceptual practice with roots in futurism and Dada, in which sound "is both the *thing* and a reflection of the thing," while expanding LaBelle's definition to include considerations of materiality, space, and interactivity.[18] I treat sound art, specifically in the gallery setting, as a metonymic device through which to talk about affect, since it is music translated into a spatial medium and mapped onto an environment, which can then "get *into*" a person. It is an embodied experience—participants must walk through or past or around the object producing the sound—and it is a durational experience—participants choose however long they wish to engage with the piece. Only the artist's touch is present, as it is her finger tracing the glasses in the recordings. Sound art is site-specific, not only for the sake of acoustics, as concert halls and cathedrals are also designed for the sake of optimizing the auditory experience, but also because it is necessary for the participant's body to traverse the space through which the sound extends. Writing about the way sound is used "both in and around current art practice," Caleb Kelly, a theorist and sound art specialist, notes that "sound is now an integral aspect of art, from installation to screen-based, performance-based and participatory practices."[19]

Haunting

With artists like Susan Philipsz and, now, Félicia Atkinson, we enter the territory of what has been called "the sonic poetics of absence."[20] Before delving into specific sonic representations of absence, I turn to a popular illustration of absence broadly speaking, credited to Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher. In this illustration, Sartre is looking for his friend "Pierre," with whom he has made plans, at a café. At the appointed time, Pierre is absent from his usual place in the establishment. Sartre describes Pierre's absence as a "haunting" and, moreover, claims

to actually *experience* Pierre's not-being-there as though it were Pierre's presence.[21] I want to take this example one step further and insist on Sartre's melancholic longing for Pierre as a launching point to discuss the slippery, contradictory, and ultimately embodied nature of absence.

Through timing and proximity, Philipsz's *Seven Tears* was put in dialogue with *Earwitness Theatre* (2019), by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, a Beirut-based artist and Turner Prize finalist. The latter work, which was installed next door at the Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis (CAM) months prior, investigates the Syrian prison of Saydnaya, where inmates were held in compulsory silence. In the prison's oppressive context, a whisper from an inmate would result in disproportionate retaliation by the guards. As such, even a whisper would sound, to the inmates' ears, as loud as an explosion. Visitors at CAM were invited into a pitch-black box installed in the gallery space, into which fear-inducing whispers were fed through speakers, detailing experiences in the prison. Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, addresses similar conditions having to do with sound and communication inside the Nazi concentration camps. As Levi writes, "This 'not being talked to' [in the camps] had rapid and devastating effects. To those who do not talk to you, or address you in screams that seem inarticulate to you, you do not dare speak."[22] This speech-based fear had effects on survivors' psyches, triggering, for example, collective nightmares in which loved ones ignore their descriptions of their experiences in the camps. "In short," Levi writes, "you find yourself in a void, and you understand at your expense that communication generates information and without information you cannot live. The greater part of the prisoners who did not understand German—that is, almost all the Italians—died during the first ten to fifteen days after their arrival."[23]

Quite distinct from these stark depictions of absence, *Seven Tears* expresses a void without reproducing a void. The distinct paucity of a visual representation in a piece of sound art like *Seven Tears* could be said to evoke an embodied experience of absence: one hears a sound upon entering the Pulitzer, one rounds the corner, expecting to see the source of the sound, and when one sees the seven identical turntables in the Main Gallery—perhaps this participant has not seen the installation reproduced in promotional materials—the distinct feeling of absence, the realization that one's mood is the by-product of the predetermined operations of *mere* objects, is akin to a feeling of experiencing Pierre's nonexistence in the café.

Artists who treat the subject of historical memory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have faced the specific challenge of processing traumatic global events, including the Holocaust and the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, through representations of the concept of absence. Georges Perec's 1969 novel *A Void* (*La Disparition*), a three-hundred-page faux-noir written only with words that

did not contain the letter *e*, provides a concrete illustration of how difficult the exact nature of an absence might be to identify when the remaining elements appear innocuously whole. Another of Philipsz's sound installations, *Study for Strings* (2012), worked explicitly through omission to highlight an absence in society. The source text of this installation was Pavel Haas's 1943 *Study for String Orchestra*, an orchestral work composed in a Nazi concentration camp. In 1944 the composer and players were deported to Auschwitz and killed, and the original score was lost. The director, Karel Ančerl, survived and rewrote the orchestral parts by memory after the war.[24] For Documenta 13 (June 9, 2012–September 16, 2012), Philipsz again disassembled the score, producing separate recordings of a cellist and a violist playing their respective parts and feeding the notes through speakers dispersed along train tracks in Kassel. In the "silences between the notes," listeners "sensed a void where there might otherwise have been some other orchestration."[25]

In a 2014 essay, the Danish curator Jacob Fabricius identifies the affect in Philipsz's work on participants as the experience of a "memory 'shift.'"[26] Fabricius writes, "Her starting point is often the interface and tension between subjective and collective memories of popular music, political songs, film experiences, and the environments where they are placed or rather projected."[27] In a 2020 interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Philipsz tells the interviewer, James McAnally, "As you enter the Pulitzer from the street, we mounted a loudspeaker playing *The River Cycle III* (2010) in which I sing "Pyramid Song" by Radiohead. . . . *The River Cycle III* comes out of some of my earliest work with sound when I would infiltrate existing PA systems in the supermarket or bus station with my voice."[28] She goes on to say that her intention for staging these sonic interventions was to trigger collective memories in the involuntary participants of the sonic event.

Elegy

Atkinson's album *The Flower and the Vessel* (Figure 2), released in July 2019, is an eleven-track album recorded during her pregnancy, a record "not *about* being pregnant but . . . made *with* pregnancy" (emphasis mine).[29] While Philipsz's work addresses a collective audience, Atkinson's voice on the album is directed at a private, singular subject. The album is at times uncomfortably intimate, as the participant can hear the artist's lips grazing the microphone.

Track 1, "L'après Midi," borrows its title from Eric Rohmer's film *L'amour l'après midi* (*Love in the Afternoon*) and is a whispered poem with no accompaniment, a monophonic lullaby, in her native French. Philip Sherburne writes, "In the album's opening track, [Atkinson] whispers a poem to her unborn child, meditating

Figure 2. Atkinson, Félicia. The Flower and the Vessel. Record Cover with Track List. Image courtesy of Shelter Press, July 5, 2019.

on the way that her voice travels through her body to her baby's ears," noting that, "at the album's end, she [will plunge] us deep into that amniotic world."[30] Atkinson herself writes, "The voice is a vessel and time is a flower."[31] Thus, in a fashion characteristic of the album, she layers another metaphor onto that which would have already been perceived (the vessel being a womb and the flower being the child growing inside its amniotic waters). The almost erotic intimacy of Atkinson's whispers mirrors the gaze described in Ewa Lager-Burcharth's article "Duchess of Nothing: Video Space and the 'Woman Artist'" that "defines itself . . . in terms of perpetual movement . . . swinging back and forth between two imaginary positions of Mother and Daughter, or, to put it differently, as the look of a daughter who, borrowing her mother's loving eyes, sees herself as alternately the subject and the object of her own gaze."[32] We can apply Lager-Burcharth's film terminology to this sonic situation: Atkinson's recording conjures the subjectivity of the mother while situating the participant within that of the child.

The apostrophe—an address made to an absentee—can be read as an elegiac gesture. The first paragraph of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak,*

Memory describes one's past in the womb and one's future in the grave as two states of unconsciousness that may be understood as one and the same:

> I know . . . of a young chronophobiac who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence.[33]

Regarding the whispers on her album, Atkinson has been asked, "You've been described as an ASMR auteur, would you like to explain . . . what ASMR is and how it works in the context of your music?"[34] Atkinson replied, "In my case, this is not what I am reaching, the ASMR effect. I am interested in whispers as a way to use proximity and intimacy. . . . I started whispering in my recordings because I was recording in my bedroom and I didn't want my neighbors to hear me and I didn't want to record the sound of the street around me."[35] The present essay returns to Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response since the concept raises pressing questions about affective purposiveness; despite the artist's intentions, affect works in such a way that artists cannot actually control how their work is received. For now, consider the whispering as a defensive tactic, Atkinson's way of preserving her art from the public, giving it the privacy it needed to grow. In a way, to whisper is to withhold the voice—a whisper is itself a form of stand-in for an absent voice, or a trace. This whisper can be compared to the bodily trace left in the recordings of the seven notes in *Seven Tears*.

For someone unfamiliar with ASMR, the soft and soothing qualities of Atkinson's voice on the first track of *The Flower and the Vessel* are incidental, or what one might call the participant's own projection onto feminine registers of the voice. For experimental musicians or sound artists, perhaps ideas and emotions are not mutually exclusive, even if "conceptual" means immaterial or idea-centered. *Seven Tears*, for instance, is centered on a concept, but it is not the concept that does the majority of the "work" on the participant. Meanwhile, Atkinson's whisper, which takes on a flat tone reminiscent of the "objective" description of *Bibi Bitter and the Snowman*, might account for the veneer of conceptualism that hides the affective work under its surface.

Consider the instrumental second track, "Moderato Cantabile," as a point of contrast. The sound reclaims its spatiality: details fade in and out, as though played from different corners of a room. A review of *The Flower and the Vessel* by Sherburne notes, "Though the album uses sumptuous sounds like a Fender

Rhodes, marimba, and vibraphone, its essence remains pensive and sometimes unsettling. Many of the record's hushed, interwoven elements guard their identities."[36] An interviewer for *CLOT Magazine* notes, "Félicia's influences and inspiration come from many places, from pioneering Jazz musicians to avant-garde Metal totems."[37] Regarding this track, Atkinson writes, "I would love the listener to slow dance with an invisible friend," as though issuing instructions—suggestions, invitations—for a listening experience.[38]

Finally, I wish to linger on track 5, whose title, "You Have to Have Eyes," can be read, within this sweetly melancholic, preemptively elegiac framework, as a cynical imperative ("You have to be born with eyes, you have to be born healthy with a normal body type"); as didacticism ("You have to look, perceive, be open to the world"); as optimism ("I insist that you be born with eyes—because there is so much to see in the world"). The participant becomes the preconscious child, the object of the direct address, the one whose "mutability and death" is preempted. Only then, the relationship between "mother" and "child" is turned on its head by the voice on the track, which says, "You had to have eyes in the back of your head." The speculative turn undercuts the affect. At 6:20, the accompaniment fades out, and the speaking dissolves into rhythmic whispers of a completely different kind than in track 1, "L'après Midi"; this time sinister and impish, it showcases the versatility of Atkinson's techniques. The repetition of spoken phrases in different registers, ranging from grown woman to young girl, accumulates into a leeching feeling, that of being pursued by a creature with too many eyes.

When asked, "Do you play with affect?" in an interview with Ben Vida for *BOMB Magazine*, Atkinson said, "I believe in art, affection, sensitivity, emotion—but in a cosmic manner. It doesn't have to be human or attached to a specific experience or identity. I feel things when I see landscapes, and then I think about them while I make sound or art."[39] Atkinson goes on to say: "Even if I use some narrative elements in my text, I usually try to carve the narration in a way that keeps it somewhat elusive. . . . I am not playing a role, but I am convoking different voices in my sayings. I believe in that ambivalence."[40]

Philipsz's *Seven Tears*, too, plays with a kind of ambivalence. As a trace, or a fragment of a piece of music that stands as a self-contained whole, the spareness of *Seven Tears* produces in the participant a longing for a whole that is not there and, with respect to that which *is* there, the preempting of its disappearance, its evaporation. The installation invites mutability and death into the ahistorical gallery space—in other words, melancholy is a future-oriented affect. It is the same kind of affect, I would argue, that encompasses our relationships with loved ones

and objects of desire, itself a sort of oscillating device, signaling the absence within presence, and vice versa—in short, preempting an absence within presence.

Purposiveness

To return to the discussion of versatility, particularly that of the different registers of the human voice, I want to take up the challenge of mapping a wide range of whispers and their affective potentiality. Recall, for example, the visceral fear that a participant experiences within the black box of Abu Hamdan's *Earwitness Theatre*, or the fifth track of *The Flower and the Vessel*, which turns on the participant's expectations by transforming the maternal whisper into a monstrous pursuer. As these two examples show, the mere presence of whispering is not enough to qualify a work as ASMR. At the same time, since affect is not a formal quality of an artwork constituted by its internal relations, Atkinson's claiming *not* to be associated with ASMR does not foreclose the possibility of an ASMR effect when encountering her work. Affects cannot be directly transmitted, and auteurs and participants must learn to navigate their "ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points."[41]

To understand affect in media beyond sound and visuals, Naomi Smith and Anne-Marie Snider published an article in the journal *Emotion, Space and Society* titled "ASMR, Affect, and Digitally-Mediated Intimacy," in which they draw from arguments of affect theorists like Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. In the article, Smith and Snider write, "ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) is the pseudo-scientific term used to describe a 'tingly' physical response that viewers of ASMR videos may experience from watching a combination of auditory, visual and tactile triggers."[42] According to Smith and Snider, ASMR is a technologically mediated affective experience that exists uneasily between embodiment and disembodiment, shaped by the accessibility and portability of uniquely online spaces.

The artistic value of ASMR lies in its combination of visuals and audio, with an emphasis on the audio—picture, for instance, a young woman (auteurs are primarily young women) brushing a cosmetic brush over an amalgam of a silicone ear on a microphone, a half-hearted attempt at mimesis. The participant has some sort of "interest" (as opposed to Kantian disinterest) in the encounter as panacea, but there is also the understanding that what happens on-screen exists separately from the "real world," its current events, or its social structures. Seen through an art historical lens, there are parallels to be drawn with the decades of art since the sixties that emphasizes viewer participation, tactility, de-skilling, democratization, and process.

There are more than enough examples of ASMR techniques, some with more obvious affinities to the whispered first track in Atkinson's album, from which to choose. Typically, the auteur does not include her face in the video, such that the auteur and participant do not exist in a spectacle–spectator relationship but the participant instead acts in tandem with, or even vicariously through, the auteur as she uses her hands to crinkle pieces of plastic or whispers affirming phrases to her "client" in a salon chair. These videos tend to center on traditionally feminine creative acts—writing in a diary, gift wrapping, baking, latte art. The auteur is as "present" as Philipsz's finger running over the lip of the glass, and one can see traces of the auteur in her handwriting, in the particularities of her gesticulations. The web-based medium, which grants the participant not only the ability to control the durational aspect of the work but also the ability to archive, transport, and share the works, challenges the site-specificity of Philipsz's work. Atkinson's and Philipsz's works are already site-specific in different ways. Atkinson goes on tour, whereas Philipsz might install a work next to a body of water—think, perhaps, of the Pulitzer's water court.

An understanding of digitally mediated affect can perhaps help unpack some ontological uncertainties within the field, in a way reconciling older methods of art history with the way we look at art with relation to our bodies. What is also significant is that there is no narrativizing element to ASMR videos, to return to *Bibi Bitter and the Snowman*: ASMR is not like hypnosis, in that there is no one instructing the participant to relax (in most cases, though, there are exceptions); rather, it is simply the gesticulations that "trigger" the response in the participant. There are moments in which the minimalism of Philipsz's work opens the space for affect, so that the participant experiences a bodily reaction and senses purposiveness in the absence.

However, the real test of artistic purposiveness, to bring the conversation back to Immanuel Kant's *Third Critique*, is when the ASMR "effect" detaches itself from the intention of the subject evoking that "effect"—in other words, not when the participant seeks out the sound art, experimental album, or ASMR content but instead when participants claim to be involuntarily triggered by natural sounds in their everyday surroundings.[43] It may be that "watching ASMR videos online" serves to "heighten 'real-life' ASMR experiences, as viewers are now more sensitized to sounds they find triggering . . . outside of the mediated affect created by ASMR YouTube videos."[44] In other words, one might be affected in the same way by an encounter without purposiveness as by an encounter with purposiveness. In such cases, the affective potential of art and the affective potential of nonart are one and the same. Participants can induce in themselves the effects of sound art,

or experimental music, or ASMR in the absence of the artist and the art object, just as Sartre can feel a strange presence in the absence of Pierre.

* * *

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Notes

[1] *Susan Philipsz: Seven Tears*, curated by Stephanie Weissberg, was on view at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation from September 6, 2019, to February 2, 2020.
[2] Anna Sophia Schultz, "An Echo of Melancholy," in *Susan Philipsz: You Are Not Alone*, edited by James Lingwood and Brigitte Franzen (London: Artangel, 2014), 156.
[3] Ibid., 155.
[4] Susan Philipsz, "Sound and Sculpture: Susan Philipsz Interviewed by James McAnally," *BOMB*, January 22, 2020, online text. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sound-and-sculpture-susan-philipsz-interviewed/
[5] In this essay, I use the term *participants* to denote the viewer-listeners who encounter and engage with sound pieces.
[6] Jacob Fabricius, "Tune in, Drop out, and Tune in Again . . . ," in *The Distant Sound: May 24–September 21, 2014* (Bornholm, Denmark: Art and Theory Publishing, 2014), 17.
[7] Schultz, "Echo of Melancholy," 156.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 50, . https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393047-001.
[11] Ibid., 50.

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