Beckett and Sonic Art

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The intermedial nature of Beckett's *corpus,* and his innovative engagement with avant garde media—to the extent that his later prose and dramatic work compromise and transgress boundaries of genre and discipline—are significant determining factors that explain Beckett's position as a key figure, and a vital force, for contemporary artists in the expanded field of visual and aural culture. Beckett's short prose piece "Sounds," drafted in 1972, ends with the invitation: "make nothing to listen for no such thing as a sound" (1996, 268). In this chapter I respond to Beckett's invitation by exploring the subjected and subsumed sounds of Beckett's writing that form the material for four pieces of contemporary sonic art: Charles Amirkhanian's *Pas de Voix: Portrait of Samuel Beckett* (1987), John Philips's *The things one has to listen to...* (1990), Danny McCarthy's curated album *Bend It Like Beckett* (2006), and John D'Arcy's and Cathie Boyd's sound installation *Beckett Basement* (2012). Following lines of argument that emerge from scholarship on Beckett's radio, I trace the interplay between representation and abstraction in sonic art that responds to Beckett's work and explore the ways in which Beckett resounds in contemporary art.

As early as 1932, when he signed the manifesto "Poetry is Vertical," Beckett aligned himself with an approach to language that prioritized the sonic, adopting a "revolutionary attitude toward word and syntax" (Kennedy 1971, 274).[1] Emilie Morin has expertly traced the modernist influences on Beckett's work for radio, in particular the radiophonic effects of *musique concrète* favored by Radiodiffusion-Télé-

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[1] "Poetry is Vertical," published in *Transition* 21, 1932, was signed by Hans Arp, Samuel Beckett, Carl Einstein, Eugene Jolas, Thomas MacGreevy, Georges Pelorson, Theo Rutra (Eugene Jolas), James J. Sweeney, and Ronald Symond.

vision Française and the work of Pierre Schaeffer, including the possibilities afforded by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop that it so strongly influenced. She argues that Schaeffer's concept of *acousmatics,* "the perceptive reality of sound as such" or "*a noise that one hears without seeing what causes it*" was a significant influence on the development of Beckett's dramatic writing" (Schaeffer 2004, 77) which, she contends, "remained tightly associated with modernist representations of sound transmission" (Morin 2014, 2).

Central to Schaeffer's *acousmatics* is a tension between the origin and the understanding of transmitted sound. Marjorie Perloff articulates the tension between these elements in her analysis of Beckett's radio understood as an acoustic art, through a counterpoint between Martin Esslin and Klaus Schöning. Esslin argues that "the aural experiences" of radio drama, "which include the immense richness of language as well as musical and natural sound, are the most effective means of triggering visual images" since radio "can evoke the visual element by suggestion alone" (quoted in Perloff 1999, 248). Perloff argues that Beckett was "surely aware that if the transmission of information is one pole of the radio experience, soundscape is the other" (Perloff 1998, 249), adroitly contrasting Esslin's approach with that of *Hörspiel* writer and sound art theorist Schöning who proposes an acoustic art in which "the world of language joins the world of sounds and noises," one comprised of "nontextual language, nonverbal articulations, quotation, original sound, environmental noises, acoustic objects trouvé [sic], musical tones, [and] electronic technology" (Schöning 1991, 312). She notes a key shift in Beckett's writing for radio after *All That Fall* toward abstraction, developing "a dialectic of disclosure and obstacle, information and noise, in which the soundscape—which includes silence—provides conflicting, and hence tantalizing, testimony" (Perloff 1999, 249). Beckett, as Laura Salisbury astutely notes, needed to (in words borrowed from *Footfalls*) "'hear the feet' of his media, to allow noisy interference to find a place in the texts" which generated forms of reading in which meaning does not transcend the materiality of the medium (2010, 356). Drawing on information theory Salisbury argues persuasively that Beckett "roughens

up the conditions of the message" by increasing the "the noise in the channel of transmission" (2010, 364). This chapter explores how the dialectic between information and noise, evident in Beckett's radio, and traced through his work in prose and drama, is an integral part of the sonic art works of Amirkhanian, Philips, McCarthy, and D'Arcy.

Schöning's position has its roots in the work of Luigi Russolo whose 1913 manifesto *L'Arte dei rumori* (*The Art of Noises*) proposes the inclusion of everyday noises into music. Russolo argues that modern industrial life with its proliferation of machinery and the ubiquity of urban existence demands a new form of music, "more dissonant, stranger, and harsher for the ear" that comes closest to what he called "*noise-sound*" (Russolo 2004, 11). Pure sound, as Russolo explains, no longer suffices, so, "in order to excite and stir our sensibility" music has "searched out the most complex successions of dissonant chords, which have prepared in a vague way for the creation of MUSICAL NOISE" (Russolo 2004, 11). Sound and noise are placed in opposition. Sound is allied to music and is "estranged from life" (Russolo 2004, 13). Noise, on the other hand, reminds us "brutally of life," yet, as the composer cautions, it must "*not limit itself to an imitative reproduction*" (Russolo 2004, 13). To this end Russolo invented machines to emulate natural sounds. He called them *intonarumori* (noise intoners*)* and anticipated that they would be played alongside traditional instruments in a futurist orchestra (Gibbs 2007, 23).

By reconfiguring the relationship between sound and noise within music, and re-evaluating the study of acoustics and harmony Russolo, Tony Gibbs suggests, argued "the case for sound to be something considered in its own right and, by so doing, [Russolo] laid the foundation for what later became the disciplines of sonic art and sound design" (Gibbs 2007, 23).[2] Yet Russolo's position on the importance of noise in music is contested by Pierre Boulez who, in his

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[2]   These developments were part of avant-garde cross-currents which included Antonin Artaud whose radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*

challenge to Schaeffer's aesthetics, holds that "any sound which has too evident an affinity with the noises of everyday life…could never be integrated [into music] since the hierarchy of composition demands materials supple enough to be bent to its own ends" (Boulez 1971, 22, quoted in Emmerson 2007, 107). Trevor Wishart, composer and pioneer of sonic art, argues vehemently against Boulez's position—"we do *not* need to deal with a finite set of possibilities"—particularly as it concerns structure and permutation in musical composition (Wishart 1996, 7). He questions the "idea that music has to be built upon a finite lattice and the related idea that permutational procedures are a valid way to proceed," suggesting instead a "musical methodology" for sonic art that is based on the ideas of "transformation" and "continuum" (Wishart 1996, 7). To this end he proposes that "pitch-free materials can be structurally organized, though not in the hierarchic fashion used in lattice pitch music," stressing that "anecdotal aspects of sound-material can also be organized coherently and in a complex manner and even enter our perception of the most supposedly abstract pieces" (Ibid.). Yet the importance of permutation for Boulez's music—for example the *Third Sonata for Piano*[3] in which the different sections of the "Trope" movement can be played in different sequences—calls to mind the importance of permutation in Beckett's middle prose, in particular *Watt* and *Molloy*. In *Watt* progressive and intensive linguistic permutation places stress on the structure of language which compromises its capacity to signify and emphasizes its sonic elements. In the latter novel, Molloy's exploration of the possible permutations according to which to suck his stones are subject to boundaries not unlike those of Boulez's piece in which, as Umberto Eco points out, "not all possible permutations are permissible" (Eco

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(1947) was performed by Roger Blin (with Maria Casarès and Paule Thévenin) who would become an important director of Beckett's theater including premieres of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 and *Endgame* in 1957.

[3]   Boulez's piece was influenced by Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* and *Le livre,* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.*

1989, 2). The tension inherent in the emerging field of sonic art between representational and non-representational sound, organized within fixed or fluid structures, is consonant with the dynamic constraints of Beckett's own work as he sought to find form for the aporetics of an art predicated upon impossibility and silence.

"Anecdotal aspects of sound material" form a key part of Charles Amirkhanian's sound piece *Pas de voix* (1987). Subtitled "Portrait of Samuel Beckett," the work was commissioned initially by James Cuno and Laura Kuhn in 1987 to accompany an exhibition of Jasper Johns's etchings and lithographs from the Petersburg Press *livre d'artiste* of 1976, *Foirades/Fizzles* (to which Beckett contributed five short texts in English and French) at the Wight Art Gallery at University of California Los Angeles. However, the funding for this commission was difficult to secure so Schöning, in his role as producer of new radio drama (*Neues Hörspiel)* for Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne, offered to fund it with the proviso that WDR had the first radio broadcast. The first public performance of Amirkhanian's piece was at the 1987 premiere at the Schönberg Hall, UCLA, as part of the exhibition "*Foirades/Fizzles*: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns" at the Wight Art Gallery. [4] Also included on the program was Charles Dodge's interpretation of Beckett's radio play *Cascando,* a taut and complex interplay between the unprocessed voice of John Nesci as Opener, computer-generated synthetic speech based on a reading by Steven Gilborn as Voice, and Music as a combination of "pitched and unpitched sound derived from Voice" (Dodge 2010), with Dodge present as a "minimalist actor/speaker" (Amirkhanian 1988, 33). Anthony Gnazzo's composition based on Beckett's short text *Ping,* with Gnazzo performing a mime, completed the program.

Amirkhanian, renowned for his electroacoustic and audio-collage compositions, initially wanted to ground his composition on an informal, conversational recording of Beckett's voice. His letter to the writer of 13 May 1987 requesting an opportunity to record the writer

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[4]   See Cuno ed., *Foirades/Fizzles: Echo and Allusion in the Art of Jasper Johns*, 1987.

was politely refused in Beckett's reply of 20 May 1987.[5] The composer then sought an extant recording of Beckett reading his work from a number of radio producers, but none was forthcoming. Amirkhanian's discussion of his attempts to source a recording suggests that the reluctance of Beckett's collaborators to locate any tapes may have been indirectly influenced by the writer's own antipathy to having his voice form part of the material of such a composition. Instead, Amirkhanian replaced Beckett's presence with markers of his absence, recording ambient sound from the lobby of Beckett's apartment building, the street outside, and the public transport metro station opposite his apartment (which included noises of traffic and a cacophony caused by passing football fans "blowing air horns and screaming" [Amirkhanian 1988, 34]). Amirkhanian also included recordings from two key sites in Paris: Place Igor Stravinsky, outside the IRCAM,[6] Centre Georges Pompidou (where his recording of a fountain was interrupted by the insistent questioning of two children), and the cathedral of Nôtre Dame, which provided the single pitch of its noon bell.

Pas de Voix weaves narrative and non-narrative sounds into a portrait of Beckett that uses the writer's biography as a touchstone. The piece opens with the uncanny sound of a baby's cries and gurgles[7] altered and interwoven with suppressed breath sounds and the metallic chimes of Larnie Fox's sound sculpture of a playing card rotated

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[5]   Beckett writes: "Dear Mr Amirkhanian, Thank you for your letter and enclosures and for your proposal which to my regret I cannot accept. I am sorry to disappoint you. With best wishes, yours, Samuel Beckett" (Amirkhanian 1988, 33–34). Beckett's response to Amirkhanian is not included in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1966–1989.*

[6]   *Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique,* or Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music, founded by Pierre Boulez.

[7]   Artist Susan Gilmore Stone's eight week old baby, Anna. Readers of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will remember how the opening of that novel renders the voice of a young child: "He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road" (1976, 7).

by an electric motor as it strikes hanging pieces of metal which pro-
vided Amirkhanian with "some erratically syncopated ostinato"
(Amirkhanian 1988, 39).[8] These narrative and non-narrative sounds
give way to a series of interrupted staccato sounds formed through an
"audio feedback sculpture" of a range of guitar samples melded with
recordings of farts, a direct reference to the title of Beckett's texts for
Foirades/Fizzles, which means "to break wind, to fizzle out." The
sound of deep breathing (that of the composer) forms a pacing device
for the piece, and directly references Beckett's brief play *Breath* (1969).
The first quarter of the piece closes with the modified noise of a baby's
gurgle, deepened to resemble a dark moan or the lowing of cattle
which reminds this listener of the dark hum of Bruce Nauman's *Raw
Materials* at Tate Modern (2004). In the second quarter of the piece
Amirkhanian introduces sounds from the lobby of Beckett's building,
which include noises from a nearby building site ("stapling sounds" as
the composer describes them), the sounds of traffic on the street, and
of the metro station, to create "a dialectic between continuous realtime
ambient recording and sampled/repeated imagery" which is used "to
complicate the musical texture and heighten tension" (Amirkhanian
1988, 40). The tick-tack of high heels, the blasts of celebratory horns,
the shouts and murmurs of pedestrians join to map out a space for
Beckett which, as Catherine Laws astutely contends, "has everything
and nothing to do with Beckett, playing with his presence in his very
absence" (2013, 241).

Direct narrative voice interjects in the third quarter through two
vocal sequences. The first was recorded during a dinner in Paris with
a group of experimental sound poets, including Jean-Jacques Lebel
and Ilmar Laaban, who recount the misadventures of a friend who fell

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8   Anne Crump describes Fox's sound sculptures: "Fox's use of sound,
     both in free-standing kinetic pieces and large-scale installations, has
     evolved with his sculptural explorations. He rigs moving parts to create
     sound—by dragging a small metal objects, clipping spinning spokes, gen-
     erating vibrations—and amplifies them so they become a cacophony of
     otherworldly screeches, rumbles and whirs" (2003, 18A).

asleep on the toilet during a party, beer can still in hand, "like a Georges Segal sculpture."[9] The second is the insistent questioning of two passing children who want to know why Amirkhanian is recording soundscapes of the street: "Allo, ça va? Allo, ça va? Ça va bien?" These voices recall the repeated requests by Beckett's characters for an interlocutor, even one, like Winnie's Willie in *Happy Days,* who provides the most minimal response to her request "can you hear me?" with "[*Irritated.*] Yes" (Beckett 1986, 147). Amirkhanian does not answer their questions, choosing not to introduce his voice into a piece that is marked by, and named after, the absence of Beckett's voice.

As with a number of sound and image pieces such as Atom Egoyan's *Steenbeckett* (2002), Haroon Mirza's *The Last Tape* (2011), and Phil Coy's *Krapp's Shultz* (2012), Amirkhanian draws on Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape,* focusing in this instance on the off-stage activities of passing water: "Beckett had deliberately included the act of urinating in his play *Krapp's Last Tape* and had wondered why such acts, part of life's realism, should be banned from the stage" (Amirkhanian 1988, 39).[10] In keeping with the theme of waste and evacuation evinced by the *Foirades/Fizzles* exhibition, Amirkhanian includes modified sounds of "rhythmic farts" in "various configurations, orally synthesized by Carol Law and Charles Amirkhanian," "bursts of urination, altered" and "a terribly American [toilet] flush, greatly magnified via sampling as a two-arm tone cluster on a Synclavier keyboard" (1988, 43, 39). The bridge to the fourth quarter of the piece is the sound of a tape rewinding (another direct reference to *Krapp's Last Tape),* which gives way to the sombre toll of the bell of Nôtre Dame interwoven with the sound of an increasingly labored breath. The composer explains how the sounds of the bell are counterpointed against these inhalations and exhalations: "the single repeated pitch has been altered into a cornucopia of multipitched textures and pitted against the breathing of a

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[9]   American sculptor George Segal (1924–2000) is renowned for his life-size realistic sculptural figures of people, often placed in anonymous urban environments. See *Three People on Four Benches* (1979).

[10]   We are reminded also of Bloom's evacuations in James Joyce's *Ulysses.*

desperate, Beckettian character, struggling with an essential physical act of existence" (Amirkhanian 1988, 41). The "pas" of Amirkhanian's title *Pas de Voix* is both the French negative adverb that references the absence of Beckett's voice from the piece, and the word for "step" or "pace," directly referencing both the spatial sounds of Beckett's Paris that form the foundation of the composition, and Beckett's play *Footfalls* or *Pas,* the action of which focuses on the "clearly audible rhythmic tread" of the protagonist May who, within the narrative of the play, needs to hear the sounds of her steps, "however faint they fall" (Beckett 1986, 401).[11]

Amirkhanian's own movement through urban space to collect the sounds that would become the material of his piece can be understood as a kind of "soundwalking," a practice of alert listening (in his case, somatic and mechanical) while walking through a "bound spatial set." The permutational possibilities of such a bound set, as John Drever explains through Jean-François Augoyard, are "analogous to the rhetorical figure of the *metabole*," a transmigration or transformation understood in music as a change in the pitch of a musical note or melody.[12] *Pas de Voix* (and similar works made between 1985 and 1992) explore the tension between abstract and representational sounds which, "with their semi-narrative but non-literal relationships of contiguous images," form for the composer "a kind of non-linguistic surrealism, suggestive of action but not actually descriptive to any specific end" ("Charles Amirkhanian"). The work serves to complicate the dichotomy between Esslin's and Schöning's positions articulated by Perloff, who identifies a key shift in Beckett's work for radio away from the mimetic approach of *All That Fall.*

Intermedia artist John J.H. Philips's piece *The things one has to listen to . . .* (1990) operates within Perloff's dialectic, generating a complex exchange of "information and noise" derived directly from Beckett's novel *The Unnamable.* Commissioned by New American Radio in

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11   For an analysis of Janet Cardiff sound walks in connection with Beckett's work see Tubridy, "Sounding Spaces,'" 5–11.

12   Drever draws the analogy from Augoyard 2007, 52.

1990, Philips created a piece based on Beckett's novel that subtly re-configures the interplay between representation and abstraction characteristic of radio, and draws on structural strategies through which text becomes sound. Philips's title is taken from *The Unnamable*:

> The eye too, of course, is there to put him to flight, make him take fright, badly enough to break his bonds, they call that bonds, they want to deliver him, ah mother of God, the things one has to listen to, perhaps it's tears of mirth. (Beckett 2006, 354)

The title also evokes *Texts for Nothing 5*: "Like a little creepy crawly it ventures out an instant, then goes back in again, the things one has to listen to, I say it as I hear it" (Beckett 1995, 119). Where Amirkhanian sourced his sound from the ambient environment of Beckett's urban space (in many parts of the work the sound says it as it hears it), Philips looked to Beckett's text as both source and structuring device for his work. Philips explains his methodology:

> I started the piece by dividing the allotted 10 minutes by the number of pages in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*. Then I created a score by noting each sound mentioned by Beckett and placing it on the timeline. This "sound reading" was created using various samplers, effect devices and synthesizers. ("Composition")

Philips maps the sounds referred to in the novel onto the timeframe of the radio performance, translating Beckett's fiction into sound to create a piece that emulates the linguistic intensity of *The Unnamable,* a novel without punctuation, paragraph, or pause. Perloff compares the experience of reading a text with listening to radio, contending that "Radio is much more coercively temporal; the sounds succeed each other, and the listener is challenged to take them in, one by one, and construct their relationships" (1999, 249). Philips melds ambient and synthetic sounds that slip and slide across the borders of

abstraction like "sparks" that "spirt and dash themselves out against the walls" (Beckett 2006, 344).

Drawing directly on the central paradox of *The Unnamable*—speaking in order to be silent—the piece begins with the words "yes" and "no" voiced in quick succession and overlapping, as if to cancel each other out. Occasionally, a distinctively mimetic sound interjects: the lowing of a cow, the neighing of a horse (echoes here of *All That Fall*), a human cry or laugh, the deep harmony of choral singing, a soprano singing an aria, the sound of vomiting. Mid-way through *The things one has to listen to…* Philips introduces samples of a number of male voices, sounding like radio announcers of the 1940s or 1950s, that emerge out of the white noise and sonic texture of the piece as if in response to the Unnamable's admission that "This transmission is really excellent. I wonder if it's going to get us somewhere?" (Beckett 2006, 345). This section of Philips's work forms a collage of recorded voices. It opens with the word "persistence," developing a narrative of self-justification: "So he rationalizes, he tells himself he doesn't hear it, or that it isn't that bad." Another voice interjects: "Shut us off from other human beings." This gives way to a commentary on the likelihood of a world outside our galaxy, "Any of us is likely to be very much affected by the report that someone brings us of a world not our own but a world somewhere else," and ends with a meditation on the opposition between nature and civilization, and the position of the artist between these poles: "The hardest of all things apparently is to be natural. All art is moving us toward the end of being natural and no one is an artist enough in that respect" (Philips 1990). This last sentence works to echo the Unnamable's comment that "They hope things will change one day, it's natural" (Beckett 2006, 346–47). The tone of these voices, the banality of their pronouncements, their ironic juxtaposition, combine to ground the listener in a key problematic of Beckett's novel regarding the origin of the voice and the compulsion to speak as the protagonist complains: "the subject matters little, that my purveyors are more than one, four or five. But it's more likely the same foul brute all the time, amusing himself pretending to be a many [sic], varying his register, his tone, his accent and his drivel" (Beckett

2006, 345). The acousmatic condition of sound art speaks directly to this central aspect of Beckett's poetics: the origin and agency of voice and sound.

Whether within the urban space of Beckett's Paris (in Amirkhanian's piece), or the textual space of his writing (in Philips's piece) sonic responses to Beckett's work operate on complex levels of engagement and agency, as musician and curator David Toop explains:

> If we expect sound art merely to give, or to invade, just like the digger or the bass drum, then we miss the other side. Maybe we should think of sound as an ear, a mirror, a resonant echo, or a carrier. Like a bird building a nest, sound can move through an environment, building a structure from the materials it finds. (2010, 53–54)

In 2006, to celebrate Samuel Beckett's centenary, sound artist Danny McCarthy curated an album of sound works in honor of the writer for the Art Trail Festival in Cork City, Ireland. The album had its roots in the "Sound Out" strand of the 2005 Cork City of Culture celebrations. The impetus behind the project was the knowledge that, when travelling to Cork to catch the *SS Washington* to Germany in 1936, Beckett visited the grave of Francis Sylvester Mahony (1804–1866), an Irish humorist who wrote under the name of "Father Prout" and whose idiosyncratic contributions to *Frazer's Magazine* and then *Bentley's Magazine,* edited by Charles Dickens, Beckett admired (Knowlson 1996, 230). On 28 September Beckett notes in his diary: "Shandon. Grave of Father Prout (Rev. Francis Mahony). Buried with 19 of same name" (UoR JEK A/1/3/4). The grave of Father Prout appears in Beckett's novel *Murphy* as the favored meeting spot of Miss Counihan and Neary.

Called *Bend it like Beckett* (punning on the title of the 2002 film *Bend it like Beckham* and alluding, I suggest, also to the qualities of refracted sound waves) the album compiles 100 minute-long tracks by an international cast of sound artists working in a number of forms

including electro acoustic, electronic, acoustic, voice, glitch and noise. Paralleling the brevity of Beckett's late works, each track lasts about a minute. The final track "Stop, Listen, Hear Mr Beckett," credited to "Anon," is simply silence: an homage to the silence that so many of Beckett's figures seek, "the silence, the end, the beginning" (Beckett 2006b, 406). Yet "Stop, Listen, Hear Mr Beckett" is not silence, it is absence, since the track itself has no digital presence, even an un-sounded one. Danny McCarthy's two tracks, "A Gong with Mr Beckett" and "Another Gong for Mr Beckett," utilize material from Beckett's own involvement with sound recording. The titles of the tracks refer to a session on 27 January 1966 at Broadcasting House in London where Jack McGowran and Denys Hawthorne recorded a selection of Beckett's poems. Music for the recording was played by Beckett's nephew Edward and his cousin John. Samuel Beckett played "a simple pedestal dinner gong on the record to separate one extract from another":

> Beckett's favorite theme from the slow movement of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* Quartet in D Minor was used to introduce and conclude the readings. Edward played the first violin part on his flute and John Beckett played the second violin, the viola, and the cello parts on an old, groaning, pedal harmonium that was brought in by a supplier of unusual theatrical items, [called] Impossibles Ltd. It was a most unusual combination of instruments. (Knowlson 1996, 539)

McCarthy samples the sound of the gong played by Beckett on the original recording, presenting it initially on its own, and subsequently in a subtly modulated form which expands the idea of interval and pause that the gong signifies. The change of preposition in the titles of the tracks from "with" to "for" indicates the development of the work from a presentation of an extant recording in track 52, to the creation of a new work using the sound of Beckett's gong as its material in track 92.

Aileen Lambert's "So Long Since It Had Sounded" (track 66, 1:08) comprises a tonal interplay of a female voice singing "ah" interjected with brief inhalations and exhalations by the same voice. In *The Unnamable* the narrator asks, "Then what is this faint noise, as of air stealthily stirred, recalling the breath of life, to those whom it corrodes?" (Beckett 2006b, 349). Breath and voice feature strongly on the album, with many of the artists drawing on Beckett's concerns with breath, and the remarkable inhalation and exhalation that comprises the sound of his 1969 play *Breath,* perhaps best known in Damien Hirst's film version of 2000. Barry W. Hughes's track "Life Support (Breath)" (track 8, 1:00) focuses on the interrelationship between the rhythms of breath and that of the heart beat, recalling John Cage's experience of an anechoic chamber in which he expected to experience silence. Yet, as he recounts: "I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation" (Cage 2011, 8). Sarah O'Halloran directly references *Breath* in the title of her track, "Rubbish Cry Breath" which engages with a sense of corporeal exteriority and space, in contrast to the visceral interiority of Hughes's track. Beginning with percussion, O'Halloran gives us a series of swift and intense breaths followed by a pause, then a single exhalation that gives way to a low deep reverberation. It sounds remarkably close to lines from Beckett's "Sounds": "Breath itself sigh it all out through the mouth that sound then fill again hold and out again so often once sigh upon sigh" (Beckett 1996, 268).

The spoken voice is also a significant feature of the album. Roger Gregg's two tracks "Final Stage Directions Of Godot Yin" and "Final Stage Directions Of Godot Yang" read the stage directions of *Waiting for Godot* verbatim. In Dr. Angus Carlyle's "Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better" a number of male and female voices—English, American and Scottish—repeat the phrase "fail, fail again, fail better," and Martin Simm's "A Scratch of Ink" features a story of acquaintances, possibly biographical, read aloud in an exaggerated manner. Beckett's ideas on sound and silence are explored in other tracks through altered

noise in which structure and differentiation give way to a continuum of sound through which transformations of pitch and tone are effected. These include David Lacy and Paul Vogel's "After the image" (13, 00:50), Sonic 1's "Falling After" (15, 00:12), and Michael Ryan's "Inner Core" (25: 1:00). In "Sounds," Beckett's characterization of sound moving through the air in the lines "sound not die on the brief way the wave not die away" (Beckett 1996, 267) is recalled in Mick O'Shea's "What Time," the title of which references Beckett's 1976 play about memory and identity, *That Time*.

With its direct reference to the possibilities of recorded sound in the construction of identities, and the articulation of times and spaces, *Krapp's Last Tape* provides a touchstone for many sound artists. In *Bend it like Beckett* the play provides the starting point for a number of tracks, with three focusing on the moment early on in the play, when the protagonist plays with the sound of the word "spool," articulating its modulations and shaping its sounds, rolling it around his mouth like something round and smooth. "Interval 3" [track 2, 1:01], the first track by Scanner repeats the word in different pitches, moving higher and lower, until the sound of the word overcomes the signification. The second track, WHiG C'llab's "Breathspools" [21, 00:27] transforms the word spool into a low multi-layered harmony that builds in intensity before an abrupt end. The third, Gydja's simply titled "Spool" [62, 00:58] samples the phrase "box 3, spool 5" spoken by Patrick Magee in Donald McWhinnie's production of *Krapp's Last Tape* for the BBC in 1972, and overlays it with electroacoustic sounds, engaging with, and sometimes obscuring, the voice. A fourth track that references the play is Sean Taylor's "From *Krapp's Last Tape*" [7, 1:00]. Taylor takes Beckett's stage directions as a score for his piece, evoking the spatial atmosphere of the play in its opening scene when Krapp wordlessly unlocks the drawers of his desk to rummage for a banana (Beckett 1986, 216). Dublin-based sound and visual artist, Fergus Kelly's track "Ebb" combines mutations of found and prepared sounds that reference a scene from *Krapp's Last Tape* and the first title that Beckett gave to his radio play *Embers*. The title relates to "the natural phenomena of sea movement and sound decay" (Kelly 2006).

There are three sounds in Kelly's track: a fog horn, a saw, and a prepared bass. Kelly situates his piece on Dún Laoghaire Pier, the site of Krapp's epiphany: "great granite rocks the foam flying up in the light of the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller" (Beckett 1986, 220). Kelly began with a sample of the old harbor fog horn which has resonance for both writer and sound artist:

> I loved the sound of the foghorn, how it could be heard from afar, defining a particular sense of the landscape with its long melancholy drone, like some large beast exhaling. This particular foghorn was replaced by a far less interesting one years ago, but, thankfully I managed to get a recording of the old one in 1986. A fragment of this recording briefly appears, low in the mix, about three quarters of the way through. (Kelly 2006)

Kelly explains how "The main sound that occurs throughout [the track] is a gong sound made from a sample of a saw blade which has been pitch-shifted," referencing also the gong that Beckett played on the 1966 recording at Broadcasting House, London (Ibid.). The third sound is prepared bass (a bass in which objects are placed between or under the strings to alter the sound), chosen, as the artist notes, "because it worked, no other conceptual agenda" (Ibid.). The artists on *Bend it like Beckett* cause Beckett's writing to refract through their work, bending and shaping his sounds, changing their direction and speed so that, to return again to "Sounds," "the sound not die on the brief way the wave not die away" (Beckett 1996, 267).

Beckett Basement, directed by Cathie Boyd with composition and sound design by John D'Arcy, refracts Beckett's words within the atmospheric tunnels, rooms, and corridors of the servant quarters of Castle Coole in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh. Created for the inaugural "Happy Days" festival in 2012, it used the resources of the Sonic

Arts Research Centre at Queen's University, Belfast; PLACE, Belfast[13]; and Glasgow-based production company Cryptic, founded by Boyd in 1994. Boyd directed the "Beckett Time" festival by Cryptic in conjunction with Tron Theatre in Glasgow in 2000. The installation comprised two parts: new compositions by D'Arcy, and excerpts from Klaus Buhlert's recording *"…The Whole Thing's Coming Out of the Dark"* (2000), conceived by Buhlert and Gaby Hartel for Bayerischer Rundfunk to accompany the *Samuel Beckett / Bruce Nauman* exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien in March 2000. Each element of *Beckett Basement* was conceived to interact with, and sound out of, the below-stairs spaces of Castle Coole. In *Beckett Basement* the building becomes both an auditorium and an instrument.

In "Scullery," located in the scullery adjacent to Castle Coole's large kitchen, and in the passages and corridors of Castle Coole, D'Arcy draws on readings of *Molloy* and *Company* by Barry McGovern and Natasha Parry from Buhlert's recording.[14] The instrumental passages by Uwe Dierksen on trombone, slide trumpet and helicon that accompany the readings are arranged according to the system of sucking stones elaborated in *Molloy,* as the album notes confirm:

> The playing directions for the instrumentalist on these recordings (Uwe Dierksen) are derived directly from the so-called sucking stones sequence in Beckett's novel *Molloy*, where the author has his protagonists invent three variations on the correct way to suck 16 pebbles distributed between either two coat or trouser pockets. (*"…The Whole Thing's Coming Out of the Dark"*)

In the first track of *"…The Whole Thing's Coming Out of the Dark,"* Buhlert explores the parallels between the permutational strategies of

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[13]   PLACE (Planning Landscape Architecture Community Environment), www.placeni.org.

[14]   Boyd and D'Arcy chose not to include the readings by Raymond Federman, or of Beckett's short prose piece *The Image* from Buhlert's 2000 recording.

Beckett's prose and those of contemporary composition practices by replacing the word "stone" in Beckett's text with the word "note" so that McGovern's voice (presented in three overlapping layers) recites the system of Molloy's sucking stones as if it were a score for music:

> Rule number one: distribution of notes. Pocket one, three notes. Pocket two, three notes. Pocket three, three notes. Pocket four: three notes. Rule number one. Take note one from pocket one. Put it into mouth and suck it. Play it. Replace it in pocket one by a note from pocket three. (Buhlert 2000, track 1)

Daniel Albright reminds us that composers such as Morton Feldman, Heinz Hollinger, and Philip Glass "use restricted musical means in imitation of Beckett's restricted theatrical and verbal means" (2003, 147). Laws acknowledges that "Beckett's interest in the permutation and combination of limited sets may at some level have been influenced by his awareness of developments in serialism," but she cautions that "there is nothing in Beckett's work that approaches the specific structural rigour of serialist or post-serialist processes" (2013, 222).

D'Arcy's compositions re-work fragments of text from Beckett's prose within a soundscape that echoes through the disused space. "The Servant's Hall" evokes the cacophony of a busy below-stairs community as all the servants come together to dine. A harpsichord and an old gramophone are juxtaposed against the tables, benches and cupboards that furnish the hall. In this piece, D'Arcy references Beckett's love of music, quoting a childhood neighbor of Beckett's, Geoffrey Perrin, reflecting on how "Sam strummed Sullivan's music on the piano and sang irreverent, ribald Beckett libretti in substitution for Gilbert's words" (Knowlson 1996, 27–28). D'Arcy takes this biographical information and uses it as the basis for bringing together disparate sounds in the formation of a work that melds Beckett's novel *Molloy* with a recording of Gilbert and Sullivan. Drawing on Knowlson's biography, the composer explains that "Servant's Hall" is an exploration of the musical influences on Samuel Beckett:

A new duet of "Beckett and Sullivan" is created through a mash up of a D'Oyly Carte recording of *Pirates of Penzance* and Beckett's *Molloy*. Keys are bashed in undulating scales and glissandi emanating from the harpsichord at the back of the Servant's Hall. These chromatic melodies echo Beckett's interest in the twelve-tone music of Schoenberg and the serialists whose compositional techniques inspired the wordplay in Beckett works such as *Ping*. Schubert attempts to override this modernist folly with the "Trout Quintet," "Symphony no. 7 in C major" and "Da quell sembiante [appresi], D688 no. 3." (D'Arcy 2012)

Reviewing a performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* by avant garde theater director Katie Mitchell, with tenor Mark Padmore, actor Stephen Dillane and pianist Andrew West, Alex Ross explains that the writer "once reported to his cousin John Beckett that he was spending his days listening alone to *Winterreise*—'shivering through the grim journey again'" (Ross 2010; Beckett 1986, 476). In "Kitchen," located in the main kitchen of the house, sounds emanate from stacks of cooking pots and lurk behind furniture, reforming into a series of sounds that interact directly with the space of listening, and with the objects in that space. The work is described by the composer as a piece in which "[a] myriad of Beckett texts are bashed and boiled in pots and pans around the room. Words and sentences are half-formed, mangled, crushed and stretched in this melting pot of influences and ideas" (D'Arcy 2012). In *Beckett Basement* spoken word is stretched and ruptured, fused with instrument and noise, sounded through the charged spaces of Castle Coole.

Sound, both abstract and mimetic, is integral to Beckett's work. Mary Bryden reminds us how Beckett's works "abound with evocations of aural memories, sounds and their withdrawal, acoustic qualities, rhythms and melodies" and that "achieving a satisfactory auditory balance" in his texts was essential to the writer (1998, 1). The narrators of his prose are clearly attuned to sound, voice and noise. The "unhappy listener" of "Assumption" (1929) wrestles with the "rising tossing soundlessness" of abnegated onanism preferring to withdraw

"once more within that terrifying silent immobility" animated by mere "driblets of sound" (Beckett 1996, 3, 5). The protagonist of *Watt* lies in a ditch "listening to the little nightsounds in the hedge behind him" (Beckett 2006a, 194). On Watt's arrival in Mr Knott's house, the incumbent, Arsene, meditates on "the little sounds…that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing" (Beckett 2006a, 199). Watt himself is an acute listener: "Watt's attention was extreme, in the beginning, to all that went on about him. Not a sound was made, within earshot, that he did not capture and, when necessary, interrogate" (Beckett 2006a, 236). The narrator of *The Unnamable* is, by the end of the novel, reduced to a voice, but not before he becomes an ear: "The noise. How long did I remain a pure ear? Up to the moment when it could go on no longer, being too good to last, compared to what was coming. These millions of different sounds, always the same" (Beckett 2006b, 347). The protagonist of *Company* hears nothing but the "faint sound of his breath" (Beckett 2006c, 428) and his footfalls, "Sole sound in the silence your footfalls" (Beckett 2006c, 430). The origin and register of these sounds as they relate to the body of the protagonist are a source of some concern: "For with what right affirm of a faint sound that it is a less faint made fainter by farness and not a true faint near at hand? Or of a faint fading to fainter that it recedes and not in situ decreases" (Beckett 2006c, 438). The narrator's acousmatic anxiety centers on a phenomenological engagement between sound and listener and the impossibility of knowing the origin, and indeed nature, of sound, recalling *in extremis* the Berkeleyean idealism of *Film*.

Listening is also a key concern of the characters in Beckett's dramatic work. In *Play* W2 (the second woman) asks, "Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me?" (Beckett 1986, 314). In *Happy Days* Winnie is alert to how attentive Willie is to her conversation. She asks, "Can you hear me? I beseech you, Willie, just yes or no, can you hear me, just yes or nothing" (Beckett 1986, 147) and seeks the assurance of an auditor:

> So that I may say at all times, even when you do not
> answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard,
> I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing
> I could never bear to do—for any length of time. (Beckett 1986,
> 145)

The protagonist of the television play *Eh Joe* cannot escape the voice of the woman who speaks in his head. He suffers in silence as the camera moves closer and the voice interrogates: "Anyone living love you now, Joe?…Anyone living sorry for you now?" (Beckett 1986, 363). Jack McGowran, the actor who played Joe in the BBC production in 1966, describes the play as "the most grueling 22 minutes I have ever had in my life, because as you know, the figure is silent, listening to this voice in his head which he is trying to strangle the memory of" (Knowlson 1996, 539). Though surrounded by sounds, the speaker of *Not I* cannot hear herself, referring only to "the buzzing?…yes…all the time the buzzing" (Beckett 1986, 380) while the figure of the Auditor raises her arms in "a gesture of helpless compassion" and remains silent (Beckett 1986, 375). [15] Beckett's work often demands a kind of "reduced listening," to use Schaeffer's term, in which attention to the origin or mimetic condition of sound is displaced in favor of a greater focus on the qualities of sound. We also find this in Beckett's prose, where the momentum of writing, liberated from the strictures of "grammar and style," foregrounds the sonic qualities of language over its capacity to signify. Yet Beckett's work

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[15]   James Knowlson identifies Caravaggio's painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608) as one of the visual images that informs *Not I* (1996, 588), noting that the figure that informed Beckett's play is that of a bystander who is concerned with sound, not sight: an old woman, aghast at the scene of the decapitation, who holds her hands to her ears in an attempt to block the sounds of decollation (Knowlson lecture, University of Reading, Saturday 5 Nov 2016). Recent productions of *Not I* (Royal Court 2013, 2014) remove the figure of the Auditor, thus reconfiguring the relation between Mouth and audience, underlining its primary role as *audiens*.

also demands the kind of detailed listening normally associated with acousmatic music even when, as in *Not I,* the act of listening is refused (Lewis 2014, Batchelor 2015, 149).

Beckett's "Sounds" meditates on the possibilities of listening for that least sound the origin of which is abstruse: "where no sound to listen for no more than ghosts make or motes in the sun" (Beckett 1996, 268). This chapter examines the dialectic between information and noise in contemporary sonic art that responds to Beckett's work, demonstrating how each artist mines the interstices between representation and abstraction integral to Beckett's aesthetics. These works by Amirkhanian, Philips, McCarthy, and D'Arcy form vibrant and often raw responses to sounds and silence in Beckett. They operate at the intersection between acousmatic music and sound art, developing sonic structures that integrate mimetic and abstract associations with Beckett's life and works. They draw on Beckett to construct a new reading, a new composition through which his writing resounds. In distinct ways, these artists "make nothing to listen for" and articulate a practice in which there is "no such thing as a sound" (Beckett 1996, 268).

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