

## Review

***Uncurating Sound: Knowledge with Voice and Hand.* By Salomé Voegelin. New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2023. 122 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-4540-1; *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound.* By Salomé Voegelin. Revised Edition. New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2021. 248 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-6732-5**

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This review diverges from common practice at the request of the editor by reviewing two texts, in this case by Salomé Voegelin. The first reviewed text, and the general focus of the review, is *Uncurating Sound*. However, Voegelin's *Sonic Possible Worlds* has been re-released with a new chapter. This new chapter is significant to understanding the issues brought forward in this review and a facet of it is therefore offered as a final example.

In *Uncurating Sound*, Voegelin addresses the postmodern art institution. Voegelin sees the role of the curator and the role of the audience – the production and reception aspects of the institution – as two sides of the same coin. On the production side, curators have become a precarious group offering art as ‘objects’ of their investigative and organisational labour to the institution, which, as owner of the means of exhibition, privatises most of the social and financial capital. On the reception side, audience members pay to come to the exhibit to face art also as ‘objects’ facilitating individualised sensual ‘experiences’ while the labour system of the institution is occluded. It is a capitalist art market economy. Voegelin therefore – rightly, I think – takes aim at the root of the problem, namely the modern form of subjectivity that sees things as objects, world as service and culture as a matter of efficiency. She calls for art that uncurates, that is, art that confronts the institution from within to halt the double bind of the subjective hegemony (2023, p. 18). For Voegelin, sound does most of the heavy lifting. Sound appears impossible to objectify, automatically relational and always inefficient. ‘Sound does not ... organize subjects’, claims Voegelin (2023, p. 33). Nor does it ‘produce bodies[; rather] it creates volumes and relationalities’ (2023, p. 35).

A sympathetic reading of *Uncurating* might assert that, indeed, sound confronts not just the art institution, which could be said to have focused on visual mediums; sound confronts modern subjectivity, which sees the world and arguably itself as an object, something sound could never be. Confronting the subject with sound within the art institution might be a way towards more relational ethics ‘inside and outside the gallery’ (2023, p. 22). Voegelin once again in *Uncurating* mobilises Maurice Merleau-Ponty's important phenomenological theory of ‘the invisible’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Voegelin calls this invisible a ‘place’ that sound ‘accesses’, a place with an ‘opening’ and ‘depth’ that sound utilises (2023, p. 34). Sound appears here to be an edge that changes what we are.

However, a less sympathetic reading might begin when one notices that this is not what Merleau-Ponty means by ‘the invisible’ and that Merleau-Ponty explicitly

treats sound within the visible/invisible dynamic. For Merleau-Ponty, 'the visual' is not just an ocular fact; and 'the invisible' designates a wider process, not strictly of a 'non-visual' or 'non-ocular' kind.<sup>1</sup> Rather, in his important 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', Merleau-Ponty (1968) metaphorically calls sensual experience 'the visible' and the ideational (mental, historical, structural) network that amalgamates sensuality into a form 'the invisible'. Notice, then, that whereas Voegelin asserts that the invisible is a realm of open potential, referencing it often as a counter to organisation and history, Merleau-Ponty means almost the opposite. For Merleau-Ponty, *the visible* is a zone of encounter between my body and a thing. Each – body and thing – is understood as a collection of force and feeling that fold into each other upon encounter. To perceive is to take up and be taken up by a thing. *The invisible* describes the derivative field of 'ideas' that condition prior sensual encounter. The invisible is a route, level or axis, as Merleau-Ponty says, a kind of embodied unconscious that is our world. The visible always exceeds the invisible but is conditioned by it; and the encounter that the visible describes always exceeds itself (i.e. the body and the thing are never exhausted by the encounter). Art crystallises these unconscious ideas, and while Voegelin often chastises music, one of Merleau-Ponty's clearest examples of the invisible involves melody (1968, p. 149). A melody produces an ideational form that cannot be separated from the concrescence of its encounter. Merleau-Ponty is here contrasting these 'ideas' with representative and reflexive 'ideas' established by science and modern everyday experience, i.e. the hegemony. He dismantles the faith in the naturalness of what we perceive and the extraction of concepts and quantities from the object. These latter concepts and quantities, Merleau-Ponty asserts, are abstractions, destroying world, based on a prior and hegemonic modern invisible/visible dynamic. Notice that Merleau-Ponty does not attack organisation *as such*.

In Voegelin, however, the invisible appears to be mistaken for a solution rather than an historical problematic. One might rather expect Voegelin to emphasise in her analyses *the visible*, or even *the audible* – i.e. the encounter between body and sound – which supersedes the hegemonic *inaudible*, striving to bring forth, in confrontations, a new inaudibility in an iterative pragmatics attuned to the co-becoming of encounter. In other words, diving into encounter would presumably be the corrective for the impoverishment of modernity. However, any formation whatsoever is cast as an enemy; and sound appears as a force which breaks all specificity. What Voegelin means, then, by 'sonic confrontation' is in fact a contradiction, what I will summarise as a formless relation, a contradiction because a relation should imply a formal invariance or resonance between that which is in relation.

Examples of this contradiction occur across Chapters One and Two where Voegelin discusses three very different artworks: a statue, a bodybuilding performance and a funk dance 'participation artwork'. Sound plays no role in any of their analyses and yet each chapter also sports large sections celebrating sound's

<sup>1</sup> 'With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a *de facto* invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, that would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 151).

'relationalities'. I will focus on Voegelin's discussion of Adrian Piper's 'Funk Lessons' (Piper 1982–1984), dance workshops advertised at, for example, a university where people come to learn about the history of funk and its typical dance movements, and dance together – culminating in an 'art piece'. Sticking to *Uncurating's* analysis of the piece, Voegelin writes, 'What is performed is not Funk as a cultural and musical genre or socio-political expression, but the in-between: the between of cultures and aesthetico-political identities' (2023, p. 31). Somehow, Voegelin asserts that participants both mobilise and cross funk out – never occupying any structure. The musical form that mediates the dance, the place of enunciation that affords a place to dance, and the participants that enter the form all seem carefully policed. That this is a university and not an art institution – that this might itself be part of uncurating – is not considered either. Positing funk as an object transferred from somewhere else, transformed into a non-context, offered as something to be performed and understood, while encapsulating the event as an 'artwork' – these seem to me to be hallmarks of the modern art institution. I agree that dance, as a transduction and mediation of sound, is approached shamefully by the hegemonic subject position. Marcus Boon's recent *Politics of Vibration* (2022) attests to that too. However, Boon argues this implies that an organised practice – a kind of protocol that encounters becoming with vibration, place and collective – is precisely what seems shameful because it confronts the self-essentialised subject.

Chapter Three, the clearest chapter and retrospectively the introduction to the book, largely repeats what Voegelin has claimed albeit through a meditation on one of Voegelin's own works. Here the sonic elements are Voegelin's voice, a field recording played at low volumes, and perhaps the sound of chalk across the floor. Only the field recording is discussed. And rather than demonstrate what is enacted by a field recording from elsewhere being played in the exhibit space, the field recorder's generalised 'sound', it is argued, offers the audience automatic access to the invisible 'being-with' as if being there is not already a kind of relational, if ambiguous, event. Chapter Four moves across several topics – 'I' and plurality, postcoloniality, anthropology, women's counter-history, drumming over narration – with sound apparently enabling in each 'the im/possible'. The final chapter claims that norms are arbitrary and that the 'postnormal' is open to 'im/possibilities' through a so-called 'sonic optics' (2023, p. 87). To claim anything is 'arbitrary' smacks of the postmodern subject's malaise. Notice finally that the discussion of 'uncurating' is wanting in the final two chapters.


Voegelin's call in *Uncurating* to end the modern form of art is of course well warranted. Martin Heidegger (2002) canonically argues that modern art eschews the creation of worlds for a subjective experience that is mystified by its own sensual shifts and thereby assumes the artwork is merely an object to trigger such sensation. Ultimately, the shift itself is what fascinates the subject, and the artwork becomes a resource in an instrumental subject-objectifying economy (Heidegger 1993). The relationship between the organisation of meaning as world, which art can congeal and move, and our inhabitation and care for that world is lost. That is, the conditions for the revealing of truth – a particular set of nondual organisational and meaningful arrangements – are abandoned. Voegelin might agree with the result, but what about the conditioning factor? One could favourably argue that, in foregrounding artwork that confronts the exhibit, Voegelin's text is part of a push to make 'confrontation' understood and enacted as a necessary historical movement brought into a worlding.

But Voegelin identifies sound as formlessness with an inherent relationality that accesses worlds for us ... Does this not seem considerably like objectification, de-socialisation and instrumentalisation? This explains why Voegelin paradoxically asserts that sound's formlessness creates forms of 'entanglement', 'relations between humans and more than humans', 'impossible potentials', 'in-betweens'. The particular relation is never quite explored. Confrontational sound remains what the artwork as object offers, enigmatic but over there; and 'relational entanglement' remains 'the shift in sensation' for an ultimately removed subject. Identity, history and meaning are taken for granted as non-relational phenomenon so that a special object – sound – can automatically relationalise them. Is 'confrontational formlessness' not a modern subject's quintessential 'inaudible' idea of sound?

I would like to conclude with the example from Voegelin's added chapter in the (otherwise almost identical) revised *Sonic Possible Worlds*. Voegelin here commendably shows her hand. She argues 'the subject' itself – that organisation which apparently only organises – is to be theoretically and practically ignored. Likely in response to critiques like the one I am outlining here, Voegelin argues that the focus on formlessness is 'not a step back into a pre-feminist, pre-queer phenomenology that fails to consider the sexual, cultural and political orientation of the body'; Voegelin is not offering yet another neutral universalist subjectivity (2021, p. 198). The solution, it seems, is to bypass subjectivity altogether, as if any and all mental mediations could disappear. Her defence involves referencing and rejecting Rosi Braidotti's work on nomadic subjectivity, a deeply historical effort to overcome modernity (Braidotti 2011). However, Voegelin asserts Braidotti is too 'organised' because cartography is deployed as a concept (2021, p. 197). That cartography aims to theorise an engaged relational subject is dismissed out of hand. According to Voegelin, Braidotti 'does not let go of the visual logos of the body as sign, which she places as essential to our being in the world' (2021, p. 197). This claim is ambiguous given that it is without direct reference to one of Braidotti's texts. The claim seems ambiguous in content also: is what Braidotti deeming essential to the subject/body visuality, logos or sign? The proposed solution is 'not becoming anything but always *being with*, without territorial certainty or administrative thought [in] the unsecured connection of the in-between' (2021, p. 197). The subject is reified as an unmoving, singular and determinant essential 'thing' to be plucked out, so that a sonic formless 'being-with' can reign. This allows 'subjectivity' to be maligned throughout while at the same time act as the point on which the analysis rests. To seek to be-with in the absence of any becoming via some relational matrix belies a liberal subject treating everything else as objects serving its own transcendence.

I agree with Voegelin that a world attuned to particular sounds would be very different – more egalitarian, less homogenous, more pleasurable, less shameful, more relational, less totalising. I say 'a' world because this difference would be, and I think has been, expressed differently across time and place. These worlds flourish through radically rearticulated affective and conceptual decisions about what matters and what *is*. Sound appears to play an important role in this decision-making. It involves rejecting essentialism and opening to play, plastic structure and moving pleasure. A world is as it is practised. I agree with Voegelin that the modern subject is at the heart of today's suffering and inequality, afraid of the possible worlds sound might help structure. And I commend Voegelin for advocating for care in the art gallery. In isolation I am lifted and emboldened by many proclamations in *Uncurating*. But I cannot

say that a demonstration or theory of such a world is enabled in the texts reviewed here.

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