



## Exploring Unsound Noises

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To cite this article: Nathan Heuvingsh (2013) Exploring Unsound Noises, The Senses and Society, 8:3, 354-358, DOI: [10.2752/174589313X13740693094427](https://doi.org/10.2752/174589313X13740693094427)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.2752/174589313X13740693094427>



Published online: 16 Apr 2015.



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## BOOK REVIEW

# Exploring Unsound Noises

## *Sonic Somatic: Performance of the Unsound Body*, by Christof Migone

Los Angeles/Berlin: Errant Bodies, 2012, 296 pages, PB 978-0-9827439-4-2. \$21.00.

### Reviewed by Nathan Heuvingsh



Both the sonic and bodily are familiar themes in Christof Migone's work as an artist, curator, and scholar. His most recent book, *Sonic Somatic: Performances of the Unsound Body* (2012), acts as a culmination of various intersecting arguments he has developed related to contemporary art and sound over several years. The book is the fifth volume of the "Audio Issues" series exploring contemporary issues and discourse related to sound and auditory culture by the publisher Errant Bodies.

Recognizing the dispersed and fluid properties of sound art, Migone develops a historical and theoretical framework for sound art by analyzing its various sonic, literary, and

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visual manifestations. He presents a well-researched and scrupulous argument for a broader consideration of the conventional definition of sound in order to reveal the potential for an expanded understanding of the sonic realm and sound art and to provide context for the inclusion of silence and noise in examining sound. Migone states that “The intent is to trace the trajectory of the (de)construction of the subject as it manifests itself through sound and silence, and the language that is the oscillating rhythm between the two” (p. 21). By situating sound within the somatic or bodily, Migone emphasizes its materiality but also how it can lead to new perceptions in regards to notions of identity, self, and agency.

The book focuses on four interrelated elements, which play a role in a new approach to sound in art: silence, the mouth, language, and space. These elements also serve as the structural foundation of Migone’s argument framing each of the four chapters. In the first chapter, Migone traces the history of silence, disturbances, and interruptions, referring to John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952) as a point of rupture that empowered the concept of silence as the potential for sound. Providing a detailed lineage of the discourse regarding sound art, Migone methodically lays the groundwork for a move beyond sound as an object. He argues that “sound’s capacity to fill a space is operative in both the physical and the psychic dimensions” (p. 14). In this way, Migone posits a broader perception of sound that considers both the material form and a conceptual understanding of the sonic realm.

Migone employs the term “unsound” throughout the book as a way to refer to what he describes as the “volume of the unheard” (p. 15). In doing so, Migone incorporates noise and silence into the language of the sonic realm and allows for an expanded perception of the sonic realm beyond sound itself. This is one example of Migone’s ingenious application of terminology, which gives authority to the claim that sound’s complex nature is limited by linguistic systems that marginalize and exclude abnormalities. In order to further this argument Migone establishes that the space between sound and silence can be made active or united by what he calls the “taciturntablist,” one who “converses in silence as opposed to against it” (p. 27). For Migone the taciturntablist and silence more generally function in the visible realm, representing the potential for sound. He also emphasizes how the physical body is manifested in both the visible and sonic realm for its potential to transmit sonic language.

Migone extends his discussion of the “sonic somatic” by turning to the body’s potential for articulating and expressing sound. In the second chapter, he emphasizes the necessity for a material body to articulate and signify the sonic realm, focusing initially on the mouth and its various noises. For Migone the mouth exists as both a visible sign of the potential for sound, as well as a signifier of sound in a linguistic sense. It also serves as a passage for articulation of the

self, bridging the interior with the exterior. For example, the saliva/spit dichotomy according to Migone is similar to that of the sound/unsound – saliva being accepted as common, and spit as socially unacceptable (p. 103). But what if the somatic voice is restricted? Silenced? In Adrian Piper's *Catalysis IV* (1970) – wherein the artist rides the subway with a towel in her mouth – Migone observes that silencing the mouth through a physical obstruction allows for sound to emerge in the visual realm, the mouth instead functions as a representation for the potential of sound.

Migone turns his attention next toward the somatic voice in an otherwise neglected region of the body, the anus. He rightfully suggests the study of the sonic realm has often excluded considerations of the anus, flatulence, and associated noises due largely to the social stigma surrounding the commonly repressed bodily function. Contrary to past approaches, Migone argues that “flatulence contains properties and particularities of interest to the sonically inclined,” not to mention that it is a universal human experience (p. 84). He provides a much needed analysis of the anus as a site of sonic expression and more broadly the notion that sound manifests itself through the body. This consideration of the anus as instrument displays Migone's commitment to an inclusive concept of sound that accepts noise and silence but also helps to locate the somatic aspects in a consideration of the sonic realm. Through his analysis of artworks that incorporate wind as a sonic force, he extends the dialogue of sound studies to a previously unexplored area.

Embedded within Migone's argument is the acknowledgment of linguistic systems and structures and the potential for individual agency in sounds of the body that are typically perceived with negative connotations. He addresses this throughout the third chapter as his argument extends from the body to sound manifested in the linguistic realm. In a consideration of the stutter and its implications to language, Migone posits that the stutter functions as an “active and generative agent by which one can engage in a reconsideration of the relation between individual and community” (p. 119). While this may appear an ambitious statement with its potential for broad social implications, Migone contextualizes the stutter as an excess of articulation. Through the stutter, sound occurs twice and creates a doubling of the self (in the mind and in the body) where the individual becomes both subject and object. Instead of seeing the stutter as a negative attribute or a disturbance in speech, Migone argues it can be viewed as a subversion of power relations in language that emphasizes materiality when situated in a haptic space. According to Migone, the rupture that the stutter produces in linguistic communication is a reminder that transmission is always impeded by misunderstandings and mistranslations (p. 128). As such, he suggests that a new consideration of linguistic abnormalities is a step towards a more inclusive and comprehensive concept of sound and agency.

Migone's approach is centered on a notion of porosity, used here to refer to an interchangeable and open-ended methodology functioning as an intervention in conventional approaches toward sound. Interestingly, he points to Erik Satie's *Vexations* (c.1893), which instructs the performer to repeat a musical motif 840 times. At first, it would seem highly structured, but Migone points out that the performance and experience of the piece varies greatly in length and form. For Migone this proves that in a spatial and temporal sense difference can emerge from repetition, which provides a way to reconsider notions of individual and community.

The book's final theme explored in the fourth chapter seamlessly incorporates the previous discussions in an examination of the relationship between sound and space, especially as it pertains to exhibition practice. The traditional gallery space is often not sufficient for accommodating the complex nature of sound, presenting unique logistical and interpretive limitations. With this in mind, Migone looks to the properties of sound in space to identify its ability to "displace, multiply, heterogenize the topos, place, site" (p. 166). He also observes how sound in space effects the somatic voice. Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) exemplifies this notion of the somatic voice collapsing in on itself in space, by emphasizing the excess of difference through the recording process. The sound in this work forms an infinite cycle becoming both the materials and production and further emphasizes the dynamic properties of sound. The work records sound as it influences and is influenced by the space around its transmission. This is an example of what Migone refers to as a sound art that is "ungovernable." Similar to Lucier's recording, galleries are subject to the complex properties of sound when attempting to exhibit works that incorporate it. Migone points out that while museums have shown some progress in accommodating works that use sound, from an architectural standpoint galleries are not typically designed for ideal listening conditions (p. 199). This reveals some of the challenges associated with sound art and its inclusion in the contemporary art environment.

Migone provides a much-needed historical and theoretical framework for an analysis of sound art that extends beyond conventional considerations of sound as merely that which can be heard. By recognizing a shift in approaches to sound art, the theoretical framework he suggests provides valuable concepts in order to develop a broader inclusion of silence, noise, and disturbances within the sonic realm. In his conclusion, aptly titled "Coda," Migone refers to a perpetual "insiding out" or apprehension in order to situate an approach to the sonic realm that is concerned with an open-ended understanding of sound. He is careful not to make any absolute theory of sound, but instead leaves space for a flexible and open dialogue. Overall, *Sonic Somatic* is an intelligent and thorough analysis that adds a valuable contribution to the field of sound studies. Although a familiarity with the history of sound art and theory could be a benefit

to those reading Migone's writing, he provides concise arguments that offer new thinking towards the sonic realm. While Migone is not the first to analyze sound in the physical and psychological realm, by situating it within the somatic he reveals how the origins of sound and its various forms can be traced within the body.