

ARTIST CURATES

# **SOUNDSCAPING**

JOSEPH GRIGELY



Pierre Bismuth, *Following the Right Hand of Audrey Hepburn in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"*, 2007, marker on Plexiglas over C-print, 32 x 49". From the series "Following the Right Hand of," 2007-.

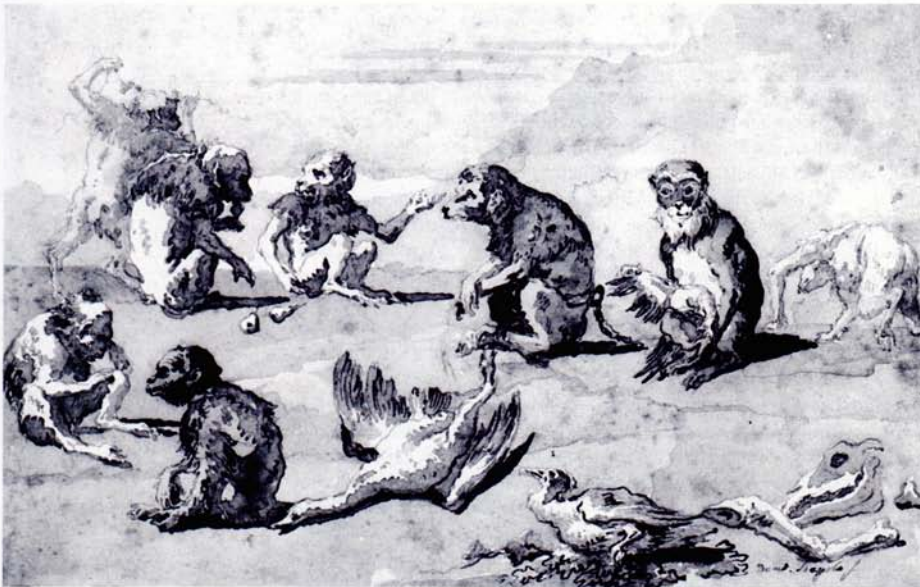
**AUDREY HEPBURN ON THE PHONE.** It's a quintessential image of the soundscape of daily life. She waves her hand through the air as she talks, punctuating every word with a gesture, embodying language as a physical act. What makes this so special is the fact that it's sound we see, not sound we hear.

The soundscape is expansive. It's everywhere. People, dogs, birds, trees, cars, radios, rain, Jimi Hendrix spilling out of a boom box, Adele leaking out of headphones, Thomas the Tank Engine chortling from a Kindle—it's an immeasurable and unholy mix of frequencies, both heard and beyond hearing, stretching from the streets of New York to the woods of the Yukon. For decades, the soundscape has been subject to archival preservation: The Library of Congress has a vast collection of sounds gleaned from everyday life—even sounds from remote places far from human habitation. In December 2000, the director of the National Park Service, Robert G. Stanton, issued Director's Order no. 47 on "Soundscape Preservation and Noise Management," arguing that the soundscape is an "inherent component" of the scenery of our parks and our wilderness. It's not just that sound is everywhere: Sound matters.

Imagine turning a dial and clicking it all off—the people, the dogs, the sound track to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. We tend to think of "visual" art, with the exception of cinema, as being devoted exclusively to representing the visual field, but the implied presence of sound fills the pages of art history. Painting and sculpture, the film still, the news photograph—by definition, all are muted by their media, yet in subtle ways they reveal the nonstop sound of a sonorous world. One evening I was watching a choir on TV with my wife, Amy, and after watching for a while she turned to me and said, in sign language, "The world must look really silly without sound."



Clockwise, from right: Philippe Parreno, *Speech Bubbles (Fuchsia)*, 2015, Mylar balloons, helium, dimensions variable. Photo: Roman März, William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, plate 3 (detail), 1735, etching and engraving on paper, 12 1/2 x 15 1/4". Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *Eight Monkeys*, a *Dead Goose*, and a *Cormorant*, ca. mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth century, ink and chalk on paper, 7 1/4 x 11 1/4".





A round table covered with a white lace tablecloth, set with ornate pink and gold plates, glasses, and cutlery. The table is cluttered with food remnants, including a large pile of nuts, and several pink balloons. A small bouquet of flowers lies on the table.

Laura Letinsky, *Untitled #6*, 2009, ink-jet print, 35 x 45". From the series "Rome," 2009.



**SO MUCH SOUND** is implied by its very absence. We tend to look for sound in the mechanisms and representations of its production—such as one of John Cage's scores or a photo of Nam June Paik dragging a violin behind him. After a while, you start thinking elsewhere and otherwise, less about the sight of sound and more about the site of sound.

Clockwise, from top left: **Speakers' Corner**, Albert Park, Auckland, New Zealand, February 2016. Photo: Wikicommons. Paul Kos, **Sound of Ice Melting**, 1970, two twenty-five-pound blocks of ice, eight boom microphone stands, eight microphones, mixer, amplifier, two speakers, cables. Installation view, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, 2013. Photo: Mark Rifkin. **Anri Sala, Unravel**, 2013, HD video, color, sound, 20 minutes 45 seconds.

Opposite page: Rhona Bitner, **Grande Ballroom**, Detroit, MI, October 29, 2008. C-print, 40 x 40". From the series "LISTEN," 2006–16.









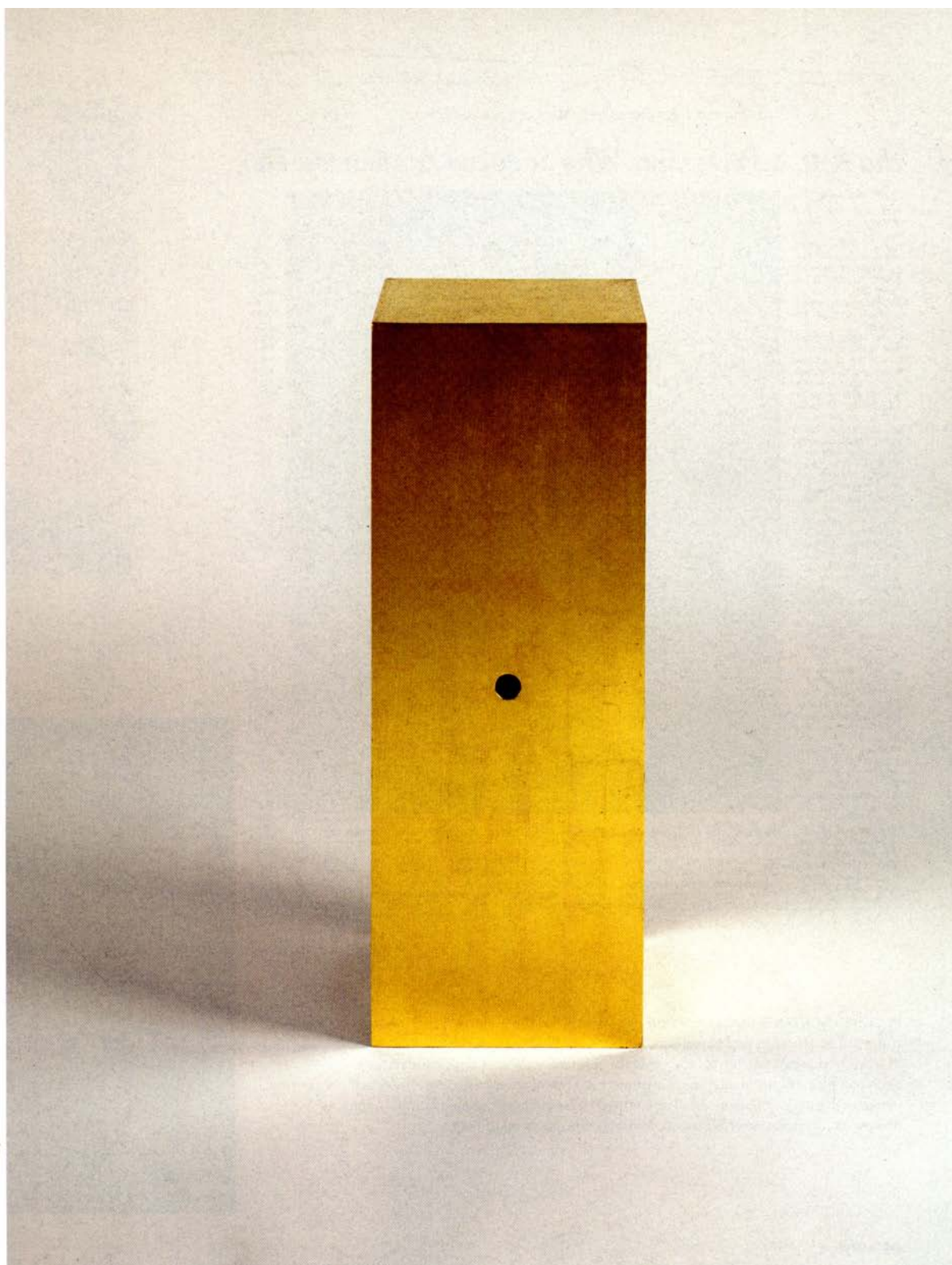


**AS ROBERT SMITHSON SHOWED US** so brilliantly and in so many ways, entropy is inevitably a part of our existence: Something erodes or is lost, and in the process something is gained—usually in the form of a mystery.

Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Self-Portrait as a Deaf Man*, which he painted around 1775, is a revealing example of entropic phenomena. There is no way we can see the decline of Reynolds's hearing, except through how he portrays it visually. Likewise, at a certain point, when the words can no longer be heard, language is transformed into what is visible: glances, gestures, movements of the mouth—saying everything and saying nothing. The beauty of being deaf is the privilege of watching the world with the sound turned off. It's fascinating to see how people talk; how they move the movement of speech with their entire bodies. They push words with their hands, lean against them with their torsos, blink at words with their eyes. These gestures are articulatory. Always legible, but never quite readable. Always telling something, but never telling enough.

Some years ago, when I was curating work for an exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern, the registrar told me that James Lee Byars's *Golden Box for Speaking*, 1978, originally had a sound component. Writing on a piece of paper, she explained to me that when the work was first shown at Kunsthalle Bern in the year it was made, it included audio of Harald Szeemann whistling in his office. She then crossed out "whistling" and wrote "huffing." And then she said not huffing but humming.

And then she said maybe it wasn't Harald Szeemann after all. This required a little research. I wrote a letter to Byars's widow; I wrote to his friends. Slowly, the answers arrived and the story came together. For the Bern show, the work was titled somewhat differently—*I hum when I think (Golden Voice Box)*—and it was materially different as well: Inside the golden box with a small circular opening was a loudspeaker connected to the office of the kunsthalle's director, Johannes Gachnang. Gachnang had a predilection for humming when he made a decision about something—a unique trait that earned the director a place in Byars's collection of anecdotes titled *One Hundred Secrets of Bern*. For the kunsthalle exhibition, Byars materialized this "secret" by placing a microphone in the director's office; when Gachnang made decisions in the course of his daily activities, he would turn on the microphone and hum—and this humming sound was transmitted to the work in the exhibition space nearby. Afterward, he shut the microphone off; no other sounds were transmitted. This process continued throughout the exhibition. But in later shows that included the gilded box (for example, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, both in 1983), the audio was omitted. Eventually, as the registrar observed to me, it simply disappeared. You can still see *The Golden Box for Speaking* in the collection of Kunstmuseum Bern, but without the sound of Gachnang humming. Gachnang died in 2005.



Opposite page: Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Self-Portrait as a Deaf Man*, ca. 1775, oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 24 1/4".

Right: James Lee Byars, *The Golden Box for Speaking*, 1978, gold leaf on wood, 28 3/4 x 10 1/4 x 10 1/4".



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Opposite page, clockwise, from far left: Clipping of Eartha Kitt's obituary in the New York Times, December 26, 2008. Christian Marclay, *Actions: Plish Plip Plap Plop* (No. 2), 2013, silk screen on acrylic on paper, 49 x 35". *Pavarotti in Confidence with Peter Ustinov*, 1994, still from a TV show on BBC. Luciano Pavarotti.

Right: Honoré Daumier, *Une discussion littéraire à la deuxième galerie* (A Literary Discussion in the Second Balcony), 1864, lithograph, 9 1/2 x 8 3/4".

# CROQUIS PRIS AU THÉÂTRE par DAUMIER

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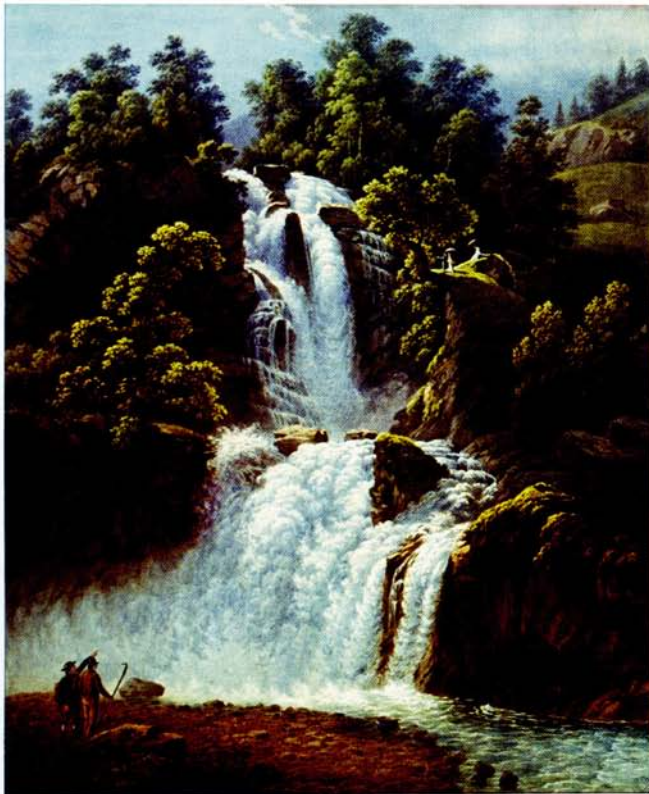


M<sup>re</sup> Martinet, 178, r. Rivoli et 41 r. Vivienne

Lith. Deslouches 28 r. Paradis 3<sup>me</sup>

Une discussion littéraire à la deuxième Galerie .





Above, from left: **Franz Niklaus König, *Unterer Reichenbachfall* (Lower Reichenbach Falls), ca. 1800**, colored etching and aquatint, 19 1/4 x 15 1/4". **Andrei Tarkovsky, *Andrei Rublev*, 1966**, 35 mm, black-and-white, sound, 205 minutes. *The Bell Maker* (Nikolai Burlyaev).

Opposite page, clockwise, from top left: **Page from George F. Mason's *Animal Sounds*** (Morrow & Company, 1948). **Page detail from *Cabinet 23* (Fall 2006)**, Anne Walsh and Chris Kubick, "F is for Foley." Index of human sounds from *Sound Ideas™ 1996 Sound Effects Library* catalogue. ***Gilligan's Island*, 1964–67**, still from a TV show on CBS. Season 1 opening credits. AR-851 Packard Bell radio.



**NONVERBAL SOUNDS**—of waterfalls, bells, birds, belches and burps, static from radios, and, especially, rain—are among the most evocative of all. In his magnificent book *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (1999), John M. Hull wrote about how rain defined for him acoustic space, in that it brought out the contours of everything around him. "I think that th[e] experience of opening the door on a rainy garden," he ventured, "must be similar to that which a sighted person feels when opening the curtains and seeing the world outside."

His analogy is precisely right, revealing to us how the imagination and experience of a blind person offer insight about what it means to see in relation to what it means to hear. Virtually every image in the world has sound attached to it. It's sometimes subtle, sound that is possible only in a most impossible way, like the sound of a blink or the sound of a wisp of smoke. The first time I did a residency at the artist Roger Brown's former house and studio, which are nestled in the dunes next to Lake Michigan, I learned a lesson about looking: If you look at images long enough, they start making sounds. In a museum you might look at a painting for a minute, maybe two minutes, but in Roger's house, I had all morning with his paintings, all afternoon, all night. Over the course of a week, they came alive with sound. And the house is filled with old wooden hunting decoys: ducks, coots, geese, swans. It's startling to imagine the sounds they'd make if they could. Art works like that, leaving us looking through windows at the sonorous world outside. □

JOSEPH GRIGELY, AN ARTIST AND PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL AND CRITICAL STUDIES AT THE SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, RECENTLY EDITED AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE WRITINGS OF CRITIC GREGORY BATTCKOCK, TITLED *OCEANS OF LOVE: THE UNCONTAINABLE GREGORY BATTCKOCK* (WALTHER KÖNIG, 2016). (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



