

PROPERTIES OF VISIBILITY

PART 1: NOISE

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Noisy street. Noisy environment. Noisy image. Noisy person.¹

I use these phrases to describe the situation when and where I perceive overwhelming amounts of audible, visible, and/or situational information. At times, I get annoyed by the lack of serenity. At other times, I get relaxed (or excited) to have the condition wash over me through the constant stream of abundant information.

Sometimes, I choose to enjoy my solitude in noise, which is as effective as in silence.

For quite some time now in my conceptual practice, I have referred to French philosopher Michele Serres' discourse on noise: "We are surrounded by noise. And this noise is inextinguishable. It is outside -it is the world itself-and it is inside, produced by our living body."²

As I try to reconcile with the idea of visibility, Serres' notion of noise keeps appearing in my mind. What I recognize with my eyes in every second is already a selection, an edited version, of my reality. In a way, I construct and form my own visual reality every moment. Even on the fundamental level, my visual perception is also limited, out of that selection through our physical ability to focus and unfocus. James Elkins eloquently lists what we don't "select":

There are things we do not see and things we cannot see and things we refuse to see, and there are also things we can't make out, puzzling things and sickening things that make us wince. There are things too boring to see, too normal or unremarkable to even catch the eye, things that fall through the cracks of vision, things so odd we never figure them out, blurs, confusions, smudges, and smears. There are things emptied of meaning because they have no use, they answer to

¹ In contrast, I have found myself extremely lonely in a crowded street corner and in a crowded experimental noise show. I cherish the sense of anonymity in a crowd of random collection of people, and it is probably related to my time of solitude. However, the feeling of loneliness hits me, all the sudden, often with this question, "Do I even matter?" There is both a beautiful comfort and excruciating discomfort in this erasure of subjectivity or ego.

² Serres, Michele, "Noises." In *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 126.

no desire, they cannot be owned or moved or enjoyed. There are flickering things we can't quite catch in the corner of our eye, movements that are gone when we turn our head. There are things too brilliant to see, that sear the retina, and things too dangerous to see, charged with frightening emotional power. There are sexual things we might love to see but can't make ourselves look at, and there are beautiful faces we would love to explore but propriety tells us we shouldn't. There are things we don't see because we don't know their names, things we overlook very day of our lives and will continue to miss as long as we live, things that try to get our attention and fail, and things that hide, camouflaged and secretive things, little things hidden and forgotten among other things.³

Without this selection and editing process, my mind would be unbearably overwhelmed with the sheer amount of visual information. As Elkins insinuates above, this "selection" does not always come from a conscious or intelligent decision: I rely on my habit, instinct, memory, mental/physical condition, and biases to navigate.

I attended a one-day workshop with Deborah Hay in Seattle in 2015. She proposed to notice every single sensation at every single cell of our body, and then react or move with them. We individually spent some time exploring this impossible idea in a wide dance floor with thirty something participants. I remember feeling so overwhelmed by the multitude of physical or sometimes projected sensations, while feeling frustrated by my pure lack of the ability to comprehend or encompass all the points of physical entries and seemingly-corresponding almost-imperceptible sensations. We had a group discussion about it afterwards. I don't remember most of the comments and thoughts that were brought up; however, I remember Deborah ended the discussion by saying "oh well, that's impossible. Who cares?" With the collective reaction of astonished laughter, I felt a slight anger, towards her and her proposition, and then this familiar relief that is reminiscent to the Buddhist's approach to futility and its symbolic understanding of life itself. The vastness of trivial and imperceptible reality is something I was often reminded of through school, my family, and popular culture as I grew up in Japan. Now I imagine the influence and impact of Buddhism in the Western artistic practice in the early to mid 1900, as they noticed (or realized) discarded objects, everyday gestures, and details of nature as things of worthy: unexplored and dismissed frontiers. "Look how beautiful these trivial things are in our daily life!"

We call the grainy veil in a photograph "noise". It obscures details and makes a picture appear less attractive. The moment I realize that these tiny imperfections -random, bright, and discolored pixels- are visible is the cue for me to ease up on the brightness and exposure feature in the post-production software. I remember learning in my digital photography class a decade ago that technically some amount of noise will always be in every digital photo we take. It is a randomness caused by the camera sensor and internal electronics. In this case, "noise" is what the device couldn't decipher out of the light that comes into the camera. Or sometimes it is simply a random glitch beyond the capacity of the device. In postproduction phase, I distort or cover up this "noise" in order to achieve our perceptible perfection of an image.

³ James Elkins, "Blindness," in *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 205.

I always remind myself that there is no such a thing as perfection. There is something strange and uncanny about witnessing something absolutely perfect and harmonious, such as moving images on HD TV, magazine cover image, well-lit set of TV sitcom, consistently happy couple, idea of heaven, etc. I take these seemingly-permanent perfection as a sign that I need to be skeptical. On the other hand, I also believe that absolute harmony or perfect image can and do exist, but momentarily, out of the noise. No matter how hard I try not to believe in it, it does appear in my eyes fleetingly. So then, perfection, order, and harmony must be in impermanence.

Generally speaking, I correlate this idea of noise as invisible things/matters: something we don't perceive, something we discard, something we don't focus, and something we regard as unworthy. In this analogy, visibility, a complete visibility, can be harmony, order, and perfection: something we take notice, something we try to preserve and protect, something we focus on, and something we regard as important.

Again, I come back to the idea of impermanence. Everything is changing constantly. Nothing is permanent.⁴

Then, life is an illusion: a certain level of death is always there.

Visibility is an illusion: a certain level of invisibility is always there.

A perfect photographic representation is an illusion: a certain level of noise is always there.

Transparency is an illusion: a certain level of opaqueness is always there.

Harmony is an illusion: a certain level of discord is always there.

Verity is an illusion: a certain level of contradiction and doubt is always there.

I call them illusions because they are fleeting and ungraspable. This idea of illusion also complicates my belief and allows me to shake up my presumptions. I often insist that they are illusions because trusting them as truth has betrayed me from time to time.

Yet, I do notice that these illusional states and things can be perceived as factual or semi-permanent. In order to establish its permanent condition, we, as a society, put forward constant assurance and affirmation, tireless work and effort, and strong (and contagious) belief system. In this current Capitalistic society, financial backing significantly help aid all those to be as such.

Once again, it would be beneficial to reiterate the idea of impermanence here: nothing is the same. Things are always changing, moment by moment. I believe that impermanence

⁴ Again, I consistently sound like a true Buddhist. I would like to point out that I am aware of that tendency, but I am not and have not been a practiced Buddhist. It probably comes from my cultural upbringing and traditions that I was surrounded with. Honestly speaking, I haven't really delved into this tendency of mine yet. I'm not sure if I want to or need to.

is the core nature of noise.⁵ Yes, I keep coming back to this because it allows me to take a moment to breathe through this unsettling question: how can I coexist with contradiction when my mind is desperately seeking for an answer, a perfect answer, and a clear confirmation of my perceptual moment?

Even though I allow myself to hang onto this idea of perfection, visibility, transparency, and harmony to affirm my existence, ego, and self-esteem, I know that the feeling of self-importance goes away suddenly or momentarily or even gradually, sometimes.

It is quite fitting to conclude my thoughts here with another quote by Michele Serres, about which I feel ambivalent. I ponder about this quote from time to time, oscillating between my desire to fully believe in it and also my anxious unconviction to it.

“Noise nourishes a new order. Organization, life, and intelligent thought live between order and noise, between disorder and perfect harmony.”⁶



⁵ Simultaneously, in this current age when we know that plastic would require up to 1000 years to decompose, I am becoming less and less assure to claim this idea of impermanence at this moment.

⁶ Serres, “Noises.” 127