

Cum on Feel the Noize¹

REVIEW BY JAMIE ALLEN

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Nechvatal, Joseph, *Immersion Into Noise*,
Open Humanities Press, 2011,
267 pp, \$23.99 (pbk), ISBN 1-60785-241-1

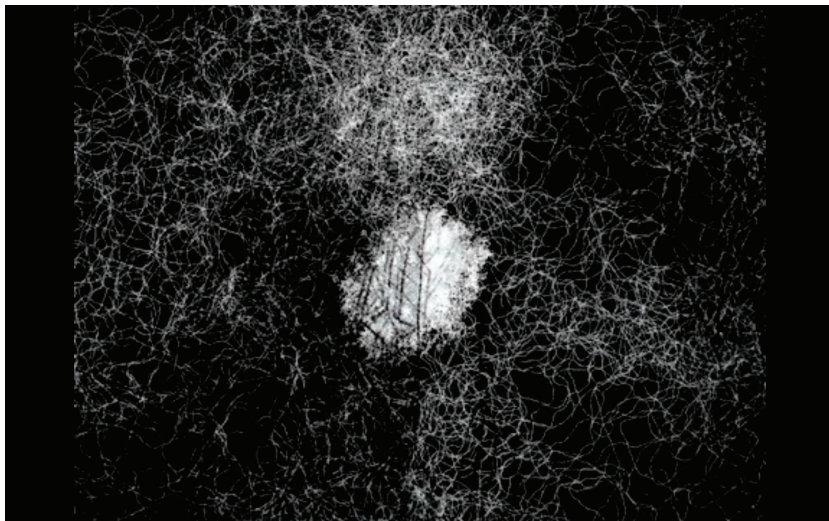
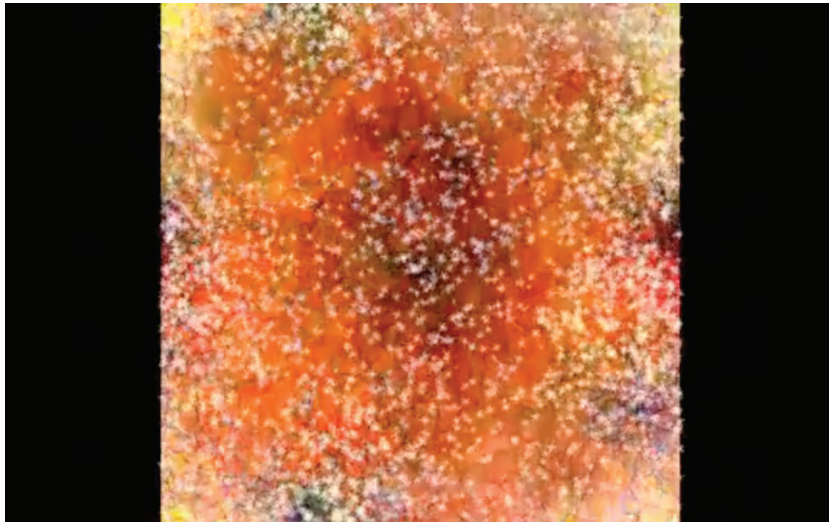
As someone who's knowledge of "art" mostly began with the domestic (Western) and Japanese punk and noise scenes of the late 80's and early 90's, practices and theories of noise fall rather close to my heart. It is peeking into the esoteric enclaves of weird music and noise that helped me understand what I think I might like art to be: A way of learning about the world through perturbation—exploration by incitement and speculation of possible new conditions. What I love about artistic investigations influenced by noisy aesthetics is that they can be simultaneously transcendent and absurd, amusing and revelatory, singular and pluralistic, mindless and intensely penetrating. The provocative friction that noise brings to bear on experience, artistic practice, and "the" Art World acts as a kind of impulse response, proposing new energies while revealing underlying structure; noise signals are a simultaneous synthesis and analysis of spaces, subjects and relations.

About two weeks prior to Christmas 2011, Joseph Nechvatal was generous enough to spend some time with me at 39 Quai des Grands Augustins, Paris. We each had one glass of red wine, briefly discussed common acquaintances, shared points of interest, and his published writings. We also, I recall, disagreed lightheartedly about how much contemporary relevance the ideas of telematic-artist Roy Ascott have for today's art-and-technology practitioner (Joseph > Jamie). After the encounter, I read through a PDF version of *Immersion Into Noise* Joseph was kind enough to send me (the HTML version is here).

A number of points of entry into cultures of "noise" are available these days. There are the acoustic-spatial approaches of thinkers like Douglas Kahn, Brandon LaBelle and Salome Voegelin; the techno-cultural musicologies of Jonathan Sterne and David Toop; the political writings of Jacques Attali, former adviser to President François Mitterrand, in his *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (spoiler alert: It's not really about music). Enter the new writings of one Joseph Nechvatal, with his invitation of an *Immersion Into Noise*.

Nechvatal has been active for over 20 years in on- and off-line discussions of art, technology, virtuality, as well as offering up his own set of art-theoretical terminologies. A practicing artist, and instructor at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, *Immersion Into Noise*, is Nechvatal's third published volume. His writings, broadly, address a concern with the possibilities of a synthesis between the biological and the

¹ *Cum On Feel the Noize* is a rock song originally released by United Kingdom band *Slade* in 1973. Subsequently, the American Heavy Metal band *Quiet Riot* remade the song in 1983.



Joseph Nechvatal,
Stills from *sOphisticated lady*,
Untitled and *winter vOices*

virtual, and the contemporary artistic resonances that these possibilities suggest. Nechvatal's project is to try to name contemporary currents of artistic practice within our technologized culture. He comes at this through art history, post-modern philosophy, anthropology and consciousness studies. Portions of *Immersion Into Noise* have appeared in his PhD dissertation, as well as online art publications like *Zing Magazine*. An open-access publication, and part of the impressive and heartening activities of the Open Humanities Press, Nechvatal's book is a somewhat unexpected addition to the *Critical Climate Change* series edited by Tom Cohen of SUNY University and Claire Colebrook of Penn State. Other titles in the series have address themes of post-globalism and cultures of threat. Joseph Nachvatal's title is the first to focus entirely on art history, art practice and aesthetics.

It is likewise awkward to easily fit Nechvatal's writings in with the aforementioned burgeoning canon of cultural and artistic practice in, and writings on, noise (Russolo, Schaeffer, Cage and Yves Klein through to Kahn, LaBelle, Voegelin, et. al). *Immersion Into Noise* is not primarily an examination of sound-noise or phenomenologies of sound, and the relativist, non-objectivist possibilities arising therefrom in social, public, and exhibition art practices. Although Nechvatal makes mention of sonic practice and experience (his own encounter in 1968 with the technological complex was set in motion at a Jimi Hendrix concert at the Chicago Coliseum), he does so only in order to introduce a broader concept of "art-noise." This noise-scape can envelope various kinds of involvement in all kinds of art, by artists, audiences, and distributed amalgams of all of these. Midway through the book, we are offered characteristics of an "immersive noise vision theory." This theory, leading to an even more syncretic thinking about the art experience, is sketched out through further reference to the author's personal observation, as well as art-historical research. Personal examples take on the reflex of a kind of art-noise-travel-writing, as Nechvatal visits Ryoji Ikeda's Datamatics [ver 2.0] installation at the Centre Pompidou), hears Cecil Taylor at Alice Tully Hall in New York, spends time with the cave paintings of Lascaux, and explores the Wagner-inspired Venus Grotto of Linderhof, to name a few. These site-events, to varying degrees, are renderings of noise-art's potential to "place us back into a ritual position by dragging art down into the felt 360° noise-perspective of the enthusiastic and participatory." (p.103)

The arc of the ideas proposed position immersiveness, saturation and "scopic all-over tension" as most productively foundational to noise art, or art-noise. An itinerary from the most ancient of artistic expressions (cave drawings) to the most digital of presentations is charted (Ikeda's minimal/maximal bitwise works for synchronized audio and visual projection). The harsh sonic onslaught of Masami Akita (a.k.a. Merzbow), is, under this analysis, not so far from colossal denseness of the churches of the High Baroque (Nechvatal visits the Rosario Chapel in Santo Domingo Church, Puebla, Mexico). And there is much more here – eaten up by noise: A rethinking of the work of Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, Nicolas Schöffer (whom Nechvatal names the true "the Father of Cybernetic Art") and the Happenings of Alan Kaprow, all as art-noise in their own right. Each of these artists and moments demonstrate techniques of destabilization, immersiveness, frame-breaking and "all-over fullness and fervor."

Here is writing on art and art history that is as ambitious as it is promising: "wildly visionary," Nechvatal states in conclusion. Self-admittedly far-reaching to the point of verging on totalization, we are asked to consider that the moments, spaces, arts and artists Nechvatal appreciates in the book all derive from an increasingly prevalent "noise consciousness." Along the way we gain an appreciation of noise as a productive and proactive tension in art, rather than an unwanted signal or unwelcome intrusion. Most promising here are Nechvatal's revealing descriptions of the potential for noise to make manifest the material-perceptual framework of individual and collective experience. How might we allow what we have been repeatedly taught is our contemporary condition of "information overload" to transform itself into a calm, warm, sympathetic kind of inundation? Treatment of experience in this way, dissolves boundaries between the bodily, informational, material and technical complexes that make up our world, and is the promise of a radical, if momentary, *Immersion Into Noise*.