

## The Nondescript

“Gonna test a few bonds... see how friendly we are.”

(Graham Lambkin and Jason Lescalleet, ‘Hotdog Harris or the Road of Remembrance’, *Photographs*)

The field of the field recording as the latter is conceived in the present volume is often anything but common ground. It is the field of the unusual, the remote or the hard-of-access; of the little known or the not-before-heard; of the ‘hidden’ or the microscopic.<sup>i</sup> It is the field of the ‘Inaudibly Loud, Long-Lasting, Far-Reaching’, or of the near silent and the fugitive; a field heard, not infrequently, late in the day or strikingly early.<sup>ii</sup> Sounded fields of these kinds are precisely uncommon, in themselves and in respect of their sources, a late reminder of the origins of such transcriptive and archival practices in anthropology and ethnography. And in being variously uncommon they are uncommonly interesting, hence our being drawn to listen and, in response, to make a case for their aesthetic and ideological value, a case based in part on novelty, whether of sound or source.<sup>iii</sup> Field recordings thus made and heard propose a sounded ethics of the uncommon.

Elsewhere, however, we find other sounds, resolutely not sublime, the sounds of recorded fields closer in spirit to the field as imagined by John Berger. This field, while not necessarily common ground in legal terms, is ‘a common one’, figuratively and experientially: a field with ‘the same proportions as your own life’. A field, that is, such as we have to hand, unironically acknowledged in recordings of domestic spaces and everyday goings-on, of mundane and uneventful happenings, ‘immediately recognizable’, sometimes, in source if not sound. These are the fields, to put it in simple terms, of the ordinary not the extraordinary; or rather, these are the fields that implicate and lay claim to something we might call ordinariness. Uncommon they are not. And so, given the often loosely organised, muted and indistinct sounds of these common field recordings, their scrappy fuzziness, what is it that holds the attention, however tenuously, or enables the attention to wander in ways that feel still to be significant and promiseful? Why, given the marked absence of the singular and the novel, should we listen? How are they interesting – ‘merely interesting’ – these common sounds?<sup>iv</sup> And in what register might their interestingness be set to words?<sup>v</sup>

The common field recording is the subject here, together with the matter of the descriptive mode attendant on such soundworks. The object is a serial collaborative work by Graham Lambkin and Jason Lescalleet, a trilogy comprising three named artefacts – *The Breadwinner*, *Air Supply* and *Photographs* – recorded and edited between 2006 and 2012.<sup>vi</sup> Both Lambkin and Lescalleet are processual in creative orientation, and prolific, meaning that fine distinctions of quality or value run the risk of appearing at best leaden-footedly precious and at worst tendentiously ignorant of extra-acoustic implications. Their multi-part collaborative project stands nevertheless, for this listener, as one of the most interesting soundworks of recent years. Responding over time to this work, ‘gradual[ly] hollowing out an imprint’, as Michel Chion says of successive acts of the ‘listening-by-listening constitution of an object’, inevitably raises questions, both of judgement and quality, and of an appropriate

verbal account.<sup>vii</sup> ‘The field affords me considerable pleasure’, that much I can admit by way of beginning. But I hesitate to make value judgements, for two reasons. First, because the received notion of the work, as concept, is potentially anachronistic used here in a field of artistic practice – post-Cagean or experimental music; phonography; *musique concrète*; *audio-vérité*: sound art: whatever we wish to call it<sup>viii</sup> – regularly conceived in terms not of an idealised aesthetic object and scenario, but of an ethically-inflected form of attentive life, ongoingly inhabited in the inventions of maker and listener.<sup>ix</sup> And secondly, because aesthetic judgements can appear tellingly to falter before some at least of the kinds of contemporary artworks discussed in these pages. The faltering would appear to be symptomatic, as if something in the substance of the works themselves resists or frustrates inherited, or at least dominant, ways of sifting and selecting. There is an uncertainty as to the status of the exemplar, the object of close listening, and it is important, because significant, to admit as much.<sup>x</sup> Indeed, uncertainty as to character and quality may well prove to be related closely to the question of appropriate or adequate registers of description. Hence the ‘vague and non-specific’ provocation of interestingness and the concomitant call, not for the declaration of judgement, but for the working-through, potentially collaborative, of justification.<sup>xi</sup>

The ‘tentative approach’ to description marked by John Berger in his own account of field thinking is thus appropriate, not least in its echo of the trying-out – the trialling – that is the promise of the essay. For now, I can say that Lambkin and Lescalleet’s collaboration has produced a work of provoking interest, looser and variously more informal than much contemporaneous practice in this broad area, most obviously that with Wandelweiser affiliations. It is a serial soundwork the cumulative effect of which is suggestive of the pairing of friendship as motivation and ground – as object; a soundwork which in its materials, its field recordings in particular, makes the sounds of friendship, even understands friendship as a matter of sound, albeit not necessarily the ‘total sonority’ suggested by Roland Barthes as characterising friendship’s desirous ‘space’.<sup>xii</sup> Friendship as sounded here is something altogether more changeable, fleeting and unexpected. To say as much by way of an opening gambit is already to invoke the idiom that is both the property of oneself and a mark of companionship. And idiom unavoidably brings into play the much-disputed category of medium-specificity, an anachronism to pair with the work-concept but one which we may also wish not entirely to disavow or to declare as having been overcome.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Inventory

The most noticeable aspect of the work, hence the place to start describing, is its very legibility: the fact of its appearing to invite interpretation, albeit the invitation comes in the form of words and images, as if thereby to signal by implication the potential difficulty of speaking of the sounds. The framing invitation appears friendly in its miscellaneous openness, a hint perhaps that the two that have made what we hold are happy, or at least willing, to be joined by a third. Such an apparently extrovert orientation to the listener-viewer is markedly at odds with the attitude evident in many field recording-related objects, where a minimalist or abstractionist resistance to the ready legibility of word and iconography tends to preside, of a piece with a reductionist orientation to sound: in winds measure recordings’ ‘double [field] compilation’, *v-p v-f v-n*, for example, with its anonymous white packaging, lower case typography, affectlessly descriptive titles, and unpeopled and industrial grey

photographic image.<sup>xiv</sup> Lambkin and Lescalleet establish a pointedly different relation to the notion of the field as a commons to that of the artists of this important compilation, one we might call unbracketed; a difference immediately evident but which will take a little time to work through.

A basic inventory of elements is warranted by the proliferation of potentially signifying clues, and by the ‘tentative approach’ to description under the accommodating sign of which the present account shelters:

Materials: three objects, three titles: *The Breadwinner: Musical Settings for Common Environments and Domestic Situations* (2008), *Air Supply* (2010) and *Photographs* (2013). Four discs in total, numbered one to four, each comprising eight titled pieces.

Scenario and arrangements: ‘The material for *The Breadwinner* was recorded at Lambkin’s house in upstate NY, over two recording sessions’, while ‘The material for *Air Supply* was mostly recorded in and around Lescalleet’s house in Maine in early 2010’.<sup>xv</sup> The first of *Photographs*’ two discs was recorded in Folkestone, England, the second in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA – the childhood homes of Lambkin and Lescalleet respectively.<sup>xvi</sup>

Sources: the cover and design for *The Breadwinner* is an adapted copy of Ariel Peeri’s cover for the original LP release of Robert Ashley’s opera, *Private Parts* (1977).<sup>xvii</sup> The cover and design for *Air Supply* is an adapted copy of *Air Structures* (1978), an unofficial bootleg recording of Robert Fripp and Brian Eno made in Paris in 1975.

Images: *The Breadwinner*: a single morphed photograph of Lambkin and Lescalleet’s faces, unattributed and uncaptioned. *Air Supply*: an abstract cover image modelled after *Air Structures*; inside, one image of each artist and two of them together, one of the latter of which includes the word ‘GENTS’, in capitals, matched by ‘LADIES’ hidden under the enclosed disc. The images in question, striped and slightly sepia in appearance, were made by Lambkin using a ‘faulty printer’ and hand tinting. The design is again modelled after the images on the cover of *Air Structures*, the photograph on the rear of which has the words ‘REST ROOM’ in the background. *Photographs*: ten photographs, including one each of Lambkin and Lescalleet as children (with handwritten captions), one of their shadows against a tree and one of them standing in a church doorway, one in which they stand with what look to be close relations (perhaps a brother and a son, or two sons), and one in which they are silhouetted, standing, behind an older man, seated.<sup>xviii</sup>

Symmetries, pairs and groups: four discs, eight pieces a-piece. Individual track lengths, and so total playing time, are identical for discs one and three (the two recorded in and around places associated with Lambkin) and discs two and four (the two recorded in and around places associated with Lescalleet). Track three of discs one and three have two-part titles the first parts of which read as codes: ‘E5150’ (the title of a song by Black Sabbath) and ‘CT20 1PS’ (a postcode in Folkestone). Discs one and three include three similarly titled tracks: ‘There and Back’, ‘There and Back Again’, and ‘Back Again’. Tracks four to six of discs two and four are grouped – ‘69°F’, ‘68°F’, ‘67°F’; and ‘Kingdom 1 (Knobs)’, ‘Kingdom 2 (Laughing)’, ‘Kingdom 3 (Submerge)’ – while the final two tracks of these discs appear as variations: ‘Air Pressure’ and ‘Air Supply’, and ‘Street Hassle’ and ‘Street Cleaner’.<sup>xix</sup>

These are some at least of the main visual and verbal marks, signs of the private codes, the minutiae, of friendship, those small things such as only a friend would understand – hence, perhaps, the gesture towards Ashley's *Private Lives* and the various allusions to pop music of the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are in Berger's terms the field ('the *ground*') which 'contains', and to which our attention is drawn by, the recordings. Their invitation is to act the befriending reader, to say what we see in order more securely – and so, perhaps, pleasurabley – to establish that we know what we hear. Interpretative breadwinning, however, while unavoidable and part itself of the promise of friendship, risks yet another in a long if largely silent history of the disavowal of sound by writing. Better, thus, to see if we might mark, by descriptively re-marking, how the copying, symmetry and repetition evident in what we can see and read are of a piece with the collaborative twoness of the work as a series in sound. The presiding figure for such essaying is the pair, the partial repeat or copy: two Ls, each an other; each, as marked by duration but not name, the home of two of the trilogy of four; each jointly and separately copied as image across the two twos of the series, with varying degrees of fidelity. All of which counterpointing posits the collaboration of friendship as a form of rhythm; or, to say it again, posits rhythm as itself a form of friendship. "Gonna test a few bonds... see how friendly we are."

### **Sounds Formal**

Along with the distances travelled in order to make the recordings – 'There and Back Again', 'contingencies overlapping' (Berger) – the middle ground between these two, hence the channel for the series, is their medium: recorded sound and the air (supply and pressure) of its passage; a medium entirely familiar from a long century and more of exposure, and yet, as encountered here in this name-resisting form, still a little unexpected. The medium via which they communicate holds Lambkin and Lescalleet together in a serial friendship, on which we eavesdrop. Theirs is definitely '*an art of sounds*', albeit one palpably earth-bound rather than ethereal – 'Listen, the Snow is Falling' is the inaugural injunction on the first disc – and the provocation is thus to consider how this particular art might be conceived or made to signify anew.<sup>xx</sup> As Berger says, modestly, of his own attempt to 'describe... diagrammatically' a common field experience: 'What are the simplest things that can be said about it?'

The presence of two, both separate and together, is signalled from the start by the twin authorship and then by the many repetitions, full and partial, of the verbal and visual marks. The listener is thereby encouraged to listen out for pairings and for passages between; to think in terms of what is promised by 'Two States' (*The Breadwinner*). Conceived formally, as a unified work in sound – to accept for now the work concept and a degree of structural listening – there is a sense of two different orientations towards acoustic material, two operations, each made audible in relation to the other. The first is a presiding continuity of sound, an all-overness that feels acoustically indivisible and durational; the second, an orientation towards repetition and intermittence, hence towards rhythm. This second characteristic is perhaps the single most striking element of the composition, in part because it is relatively easily articulated, and because it answers acoustically, as one more repetition, the work's framing visual rhythms. 'There and Back', for example, the second piece on *The Breadwinner*, includes near the beginning an arrhythmic tapping or flapping; a soft flapping, slightly hollow-sounding, heard intermittently over the four minutes. We shall not be able to say with any certainty what makes the sound, but it serves nevertheless as an anchor point against which we sense the other rhythms and

repetitions: some kind of detonation, complete with descending whistle; a sound as if of a ball being bounced; and a short and discretely placed recording, higher-pitched, of the tinkle of metal on glass and in water, sounded repeatedly with an effect pointedly contrapuntal as well as somehow gestural. Sounds, each a rhythmic character, are heard as if from inside a room, within the warmly muffled ambience of which we situate the little motifs one against the other, some as if close, others recessed. The rhythmic field becomes for this listener one of the titular domestic situations, light and modest-sounding, even mildly ironizing in tone. The situation of the domestic, as it is happening here or as it is made to happen, sounds as a matter of rhythm.

The series includes a host of other constituent parts that, while various in terms of sound, speed, duration and imagined cause, are heard as a general rhythmic disposition, a marking of intermittency that in the fact of its being repeated, comes to feel significant. These field-recorded rhythms, to speak of them in terms of imagined sources, include, *inter alia*, the common sounds of the creaking of a door ('Listen, the Snow is Falling'), the inhalation and exhalation of snoring ('E5150/Body Transport'), some kind of sawing ('Soap Opera Suite'), shovelling and the engines of passing cars ('Because the Night') and footsteps ('Back Again'). Some of the sounds have clearly been treated after the event of their recording, either looped or extended in duration, but the overall impression is of an abundantly polyrhythmic auditory field.

Against or alongside these passages we hear sounds that are markedly continuous as opposed to intermittent or spaced. These are, most consistently, the ambient sounds registered by microphones, the presiding ground for the acoustic events of many of the constituent pieces. If Lambkin and Lescalleet can be said to have made a field recording of one thing in particular, albeit inadvertently, we might nominate this most common of sounds: the ambient sound of the passage of air and of the immediate acoustic environment. And if we were to nominate a true commons of the field recording as acoustic object, it would be this: same-sounding but endlessly variable in texture and volume, a muffled quasi-presence, animate and yet somehow inert, unrepeatable and yet universal. Description's limit, if we imagine such a framing, is marked by this unmarked sound.

The 'complex', 'continuously sustained' mass of ambient sound, the work's ground, is heard alongside all the other ostensibly non-rhythmic, hence uneventful, passages whose dominant sonic character is uninterrupted.<sup>xxi</sup> This listener registers many of these as field recordings, whether treated or not, distinct from the ground ambience and from the more eventful acoustic happenings that sound as if 'on top' of these two layers. And then very close in character to these assorted field recordings are those sounds more akin to musical drones; sounds, that is, that strike the listener as musical rather than environmental, albeit the work as a whole renders such distinctions moot. These sounds tend to have a gothic, ghostly and ominous character, as if in acknowledgement of the affiliation of drone and threnody.

My language, as it works to disaggregate and give adequate expression to what I hear, is effortful. I can feel its being so. Critical inarticulacy is admissible nevertheless, and worth preserving, as the mark of an aesthetic response such as I am seeking to register here and to work through.<sup>xxii</sup> More particularly, performatively laboured descriptions such as these are excused on the grounds that they help pragmatically to substantiate with detail a relatively intuitive sense, acknowledged over time, of the twinned formal

orientations of Lambkin and Lescalleet's series: the rhythmic and the continuous, or the interrupted and the sustained. We might be inclined to identify these pairs as equivalent to the event and the field, were it not for Berger's caveat regarding the need of each for the other: 'All events exist as definable events by virtue of their *relation* to other events', such that each is the event of the other (emphasis added). The sustained sounds of Lambkin and Lescalleet's fields are arranged rhythmically – interruptively; relationally – against the rhythmic passages, at however slow a tempo; and the sustained sounds, as we know, are ever indigenously and pulsingly rhythmic in texture and in their complex massing. The formal operation in this art of sound, rather than being a twoness in the sense of pairing or binary, is more akin to the marking or spacing of time: the cutting or division of duration and the possibility of such by means of the edit. The rhythmic cut conjoins just as it holds apart. It is the mark here of friendship, but also of the cut made by the recording in the field of the common where friendship is happening.<sup>xxiii</sup>

### Sounds Informal

The foregoing description, itself a cutting and editing of its object, is too abstracting to name with sufficient security or suggestiveness a soundwork of such informality, such abundant scrappiness. Nor does it offer any explanation as to why and in what particular manner such sounds might detain us – why, that is, they are interesting. We need now to acknowledge what Chion calls 'the interested nature of audition', our propensity to wonder, as we listen, "What is that?", "Where is it coming from?"<sup>xxiv</sup> The sounds themselves enjoin us to listen 'causally' and 'figuratively'.<sup>xxv</sup> Doing so, we sense gradually, almost 'diagrammatically' (to use Berger's word), a small repertoire of field sounds, variously modest, fugitive, funny and obtuse. "It has a little bit of everything in it", so we are told ('If All Goes Well', *Photographs*). For these are sounds which, heard repeatedly, gather according to what appears to be an overlapping series of anthropo- and eco-logical groupings and scenarios. They are the titular sounds of *Common Environments and Domestic Situations*.

To begin, L and L's common field is elemental.<sup>xxvi</sup> We hear over the time of the collaboration a series of variations on the sounds of each of the four classical elements. The aforementioned airiness is evident throughout, most obviously in the lo-fi field disruptions of the wind, but also in the nondescript ambience of the outside air in which seagulls cry, through which cars pass by and over which bells sound. The end of 'Layman's Lament' (*Air Supply*) is particularly striking, in its apparent move outward and upward from chant-like human sounds into bird-filled open air. Earth, down below all along, is acknowledged in the 'Street Hassle' (*Photographs*) sounds of walking and the shovelling of 'Because the Night' (*Air Supply*), and in the repeated drones, each its own texture but all in their rumbling grittiness suggestive of the subterranean – the ancient drone of the ear in the earth rather than the eye in the sky. Fire sounds just once, as a hint of warmth in 'Listen, the Snow is Falling' – an inaugural gesture of comfort and solace – and water too is here, particularly in *The Breadwinner*, with its twin action motifs of bubbling and boiling, and of being stirred.

The sound of the elements is heard as environmental, an ambient signifier of the recordings and the ambience of the recording itself, the artwork, as object. I am reluctant to posit the elemental sounds as primarily locational, so as fixing all the rest, but that is certainly one way in which they imprint themselves and in which we might interpret them. And yet a relation of fixing is perhaps too grasping a response in

establishing a default mode of ground-figure arrangement. The elemental-environmental sounds are not separate from or underpinnings for those acoustic signs of the human; rather, the elements are intertwined with the ostensibly human such that each inhabits and is inhabited by the other in a blurring of what might otherwise settle into a too enclosingly defined self-other relation. For L and L most certainly do sound out, in a finely nuanced way but without show or piety, the fact of being human. We hear the common sounds, first, of things being *done* – of liquid being stirred, something or other variously shovelled or cut or drawn; and of walking and assorted unidentifiable fumblings – and of things being *said*, snippets of passing conversation about taxis, banjo playing, food and drink. And against these incidental sounds of the waking hours we hear the sound most unavailable to us in the moment of its making, that of our being asleep, marked here by snoring (what else?), an earth-bound drone-in-waiting, both non-verbal vocal signature and a lamenting reminder of our proximity to unconsciousness (with the hint also of a blokeish practical joke).<sup>xxvii</sup>

The imprint left by the ‘listening-by-listening constitution’ of the series is characterised once again not by an aloneness or separation, but by a relation between sounds. This relation, in the case of the human-made sounds, is touchingly communal and ritualistic, a marking – again, free of piety or grandeur – of occasions of being together and of being with others. Field recording-oriented artworks can imply a separateness or isolation on the part of the recordist, whether literally, as a being-apart of location, or metaphorically, in a recorded disposition to objects or scenarios variously expressive of a person singularly alone with singular things – alone, that is, with their listening, including the prosthetic listening of the recording technology and the implied future listening of a solo auditor. L & L’s field, conversely, is populated, a field of occasion. *Photographs*, the final part of the trilogy, is especially richly communal in acoustic character, as if with the intention of drawing out a particular aspect of the first two parts of the series.

Being together is sounded in two ways in particular, each signifying and acknowledging a form of community. The first is foreheard in the bell of ‘The Breadwinner’, a motif picked up at the start of *Photographs* (‘Loss’) and in the chant-like vocal sounds of ‘Layman’s Lament’ (and echoed in the whistling kettle of ‘If All Goes Well’). ‘Quested to St Hilda’, a field recording of part of a church ceremony, suggests a possible reading of these two apparently isolated compositional elements in terms of a ritualized communal, and of song. We hear a priest’s voice and then the beginning of a congregation singing, “How sweet the name of Mary...”; while a little later, in ‘Gold Interior’, a fragment of conversation – “went to listen to the bells last night... Baptist church...” – further directs attention. Bell- and singing-sounds are treated after the fact, pushed and pulled gravitationally towards what feels over time to be an ever-present possibility of the drone; but then these highly marked field moments imply an origin for the drone not only in lament, as already noted, but also in community and ritual, especially the communal performance of song: song as grounded in the drone or emerging from it, an intermittency inherent as potential in duration.

The second occasion is marked not by song but by food, in particular, by the archetypal ritual of food prepared and shared. This element is pointed up in particular across the twinned discs of *Photographs*, each of which testifies movingly to the occasion of collaboration as happening unshowily within and around the scene of the everyday. The second disc is bookended by rituals of domestic hospitality, beginning

with a shared lunch of “chicken and vegetable soup” – soup with, again, “a little of everything in it”, in case the listener, as silent guest, hadn’t already noticed – and ending drily with a review of dessert: “Jason, were you a fan of the plum pudding?” To which Jason replies, “No”. (Jason’s surname has earlier been figured in relation specifically to cooking, in the brief discussion on the subject of skillets included as part of ‘If Truth Be Told’ (*Photographs*).) An analogy is sounded between the making and sharing of food, as an act of hospitality, and the making of the soundwork as in this conception a record of collaborative hospitality and domestic invention. Where so much field recording-oriented practice appears to aspire to a condition of auditory uncanniness – the uncommon as uncanny – L and L are at home, making and performing a shared space of invention the achieved ordinariness of which is the feat of the collaboration.<sup>xxviii</sup> The homemade – the made at, in and by the home – is their ‘site’, their commons, their conjured re-cording: a commonplace act of the heart.<sup>xxix</sup>

### Description’s Field

Descriptions such as these, tentative in approach as they are, offer in turn a temporary home in language for what is heard; a home suggested by the sounds themselves, but made, necessarily, by the words through and with which we form, gradually, a relation to those sounds. The relation happens in the temporary home of the description. Ekphrasis – for that is the rhetorical mode – speaks out from a place between the listener and the presently silent soundwork (it is silent now, as I write and as you read), hoping through an act of mediated invention to conjure a presence for the work such that it appears animated anew in language, the same but different. Description, however doggedly faithful or wilfully inventive, testifies to the interestingness of its material; it is, let’s say, the re-mark in writing of the interesting, akin to Chion’s ‘imprint’, the ‘listening-by-listening constitution of an object’.<sup>xxx</sup>

The discourse of description, especially as it figures in accounts of the theory and practice of art criticism, both suggests and at times seeks to maintain a considerable distance from interpretation; as if one form of words is able pristinely to indicate, whereas another is burdened with the lesser or greater task, depending on how one conceives the work, of glossing. And yet *descriptio*, a figure of rhetoric, as it finds a place to start and a way of stretching out and going on, is never other than tendentious.<sup>xxxi</sup> Sound’s writing, following as it does, and whether it likes it or not, in the wake of the discursive fields of music criticism, can be rather resistant to such tendencies, in particular, to those ostensibly inherent in non-technical descriptive modes: to the particularities that enable and so characterise scenarios of listening, and to the potential for a graspingly co-optive and normative relationship of listener and listened-to.<sup>xxxii</sup> Hence, for example, Patrick Farmer’s recent text score, ‘Listening and its not’, a direct response to the ostensibly predatory workings of description.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Farmer instructs the participant to ‘try and write about listening in a way that does not point directly to, or at it’, hence to conceive a text in which the originating acoustic matter is constitutively absent for the reader. ‘[K]eeping distance’ is the possibility here, an evasion of dualism and of direct appropriation or projection, and an opening towards the ‘overgrown, forgotten, something else’: ‘A description without sense that may pick up new qualities’.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

I mention this provocation as an instance of one strand of thinking within sound studies, and, more immediately, because the present essay, in being avowedly a description with sense (or so one hopes), aspires to precisely that mode against which

the not of listening protests. The aspiration thus far to a form of descriptive close listening, is, again, strategic, of a piece with a provisional acceptance of medium specificity and the work concept, and in response to the performative contradiction of those paradoxically brief and vague expositions of specific works evident in much writing about sound art. Berger asks of his own field, ‘What are the simplest things that can be said about it?’, a question that yields a description simple only in the sense that the writing testifies in its movements to an attentive proximity to its object and to a desire to draw its reader into a similar relation.<sup>xxxv</sup> Closeness, as a figure of relation, is just as much a matter of ethics as are distance or resistance. As Lawrence Kramer writes in defence of the ‘ordinary language’ of common musical discourse, ‘The act of description required by the object’s inability to speak for itself is an encounter with otherness in the most positive sense of the term’.<sup>xxxvi</sup> To seek through instructive intervention to bypass description’s grounding register is in one sense tacitly, albeit anxiously, to maintain the dual ideal of a sound object conceived as an other of language, and so of idiom, and, conversely, of an unmediated conveyance between listener, writer and reader.<sup>xxxvii</sup> There is no bypassing description’s encounter and no need, faced with the scenario, to be anxious or melancholy – or, for that matter, to be idealistically hopeful about the chances of a union of media, hence of an “overcoming of otherness”<sup>xxxviii</sup>. The question is not, or not only, how we might escape the common predicament, but in what registers of invention it might be inhabited, this avowedly ‘artificial thing that exists / In its own seeming’.<sup>xxxix</sup>

And so how further to develop the tendencies in this ekphrasis, towards a *reading* of the L and L’s soundwork, one that might account for why, given the acknowledged aspects of form and texture, the sounds provoke and are valuable? How to stretch the descriptive tendencies a little further in order to meet by re-marking the marks of a work at once affecting and yet benignly resistant to that language in which affection enters the commons of discourse and so comes to be open to contestation?

The tendency in the description thus far has been toward notating a loose and welcoming openness of elements that have in common a play on the figure of twoness: the copy; the iterated; the pair; the collaboration; the symmetrical; the friends, L and another L. A presiding relationality is heard, again loosely, in the work’s performed organising of duration, its play with continuity and interruption, and with the rhythm of the cut or edit by which one becomes the other; and heard also in the repeated sounding of scenarios of sharing and communal, through and within an environment of elements. Serial composition; a looseness of form, accommodating in its gathering of elements (‘a little bit of everything in it’); a plethora of anecdotal signs; and held within these frames, sounded scenes of friendship and domestic sociability, and a presiding attention to the field of the common: would it not be true to say that the constituent parts thus described sound suspiciously akin to those of that most commonplace of verbal art forms, the novel? Yes, the novel, odd as it may seem to suggest such a connection. And if we accept the apparent family resemblance? What conception of L and L’s soundwork might be made possible by a description that has tended in this direction, however unexpectedly?

To work out this possibility I turn, as the first step of a brief detour, to Roland Barthes, writing about music and description in Balzac’s *Sarrasine*:

What would happen if one actually performed Marianina’s “addio” as it is described in the discourse? Something incongruous, no doubt, extravagant,

and not musical. More: is it really possible to perform the act described? This leads to two propositions. The first is that the discourse has no responsibility via-à-vis the real: in the most realistic novel, the referent has no ‘reality’: suffice it to imagine the disorder the most orderly narrative would create were its descriptions taken at face value, converted into operative programs and simply *executed*.<sup>xl</sup>

‘Something incongruous, no doubt, extravagant, and not musical’: this might serve as a thumbnail description of L and L’s collaboration, a counterpointing of the disharmony of incongruence and the divergent energies of the extravagant. Barthes considers here a particular aspect of what he had previously identified as ‘the reality effect’ of descriptive writing in fictional prose, classic realist novels in particular; those passages of writing conventionally understood quietly and faithfully, even a little boringly, to establish and colour a world for the human drama, but which, so Barthes suggests, serve an altogether more tendentious function in corroborating and authenticating the claim made by novelistic prose on the field of the real.

The idea that a realisation of the descriptions of realism would result, not in real-ness but in ‘disorder’, was neatly borne out shortly after Barthes made his suggestion, and with reference specifically to acoustic markers, by John Cage in his text score, *— — — Circus On —*, described as a ‘Means for translating a book into a performance without actors, a performance which is both literary and musical or one or the other’.<sup>xli</sup> Cage’s proposal, first realised in his own *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (1979), is for the making of a new piece from a performance of all the sounds in a chosen literary work, to the accompaniment of a verbal text extracted from the source through a series of processual operations – not a straightforward acoustic conversion of a novel’s signified aurality, but certainly an artfully disordered execution of description’s signifiers.<sup>xlii</sup> L and L’s work, given its anecdotal and geographical orientations, might be conceived along these lines, as a Cagean realisation without a source text; an acoustic fiction with no originating words. To do so, however, would require projecting the traces of a prior verbal narrative onto the acoustic material, a narrative for L and L that would account in entirely conventional literary terms for the snatches of conversation that we hear and the various comings and goings that we imagine by means of the recorded sounds. Rather than think of these ingredients as the sounded rustlings of language and so resort yet again to the comforts of one more back translation from sound to word, we might instead hear this work in sound, not as the acoustic version of an imagined novel, but as the sounding out, literally and metaphorically, of an *idea* of the novelistic, taking a cue perhaps from one of L and L’s clues: Robert Ashley’s *Private Parts*, with its ‘*meditation*’ on the form of opera;<sup>xliii</sup> the novelistic conceived, that is, as a recording, via description, of the field of common things, a field the commonness of which is acknowledged and affirmed rather than lyricized, atomised or abstracted.<sup>xliv</sup> This is an idea of the novel inherited most emphatically from the mid- and late-nineteenth century and which has been variously operative and evident in fiction since then; a record of the going-on of the secular prosaic, what in different contexts has been thought of as the everyday or the ordinary or the insignificant (terms far from interchangeable).<sup>xlv</sup> The novelistic thus conceived is the field of the common, if not in the sense of ownership then in terms at least of a marking of the shared territory of the domestic, in all its parts. Other arts have attended to it, painting most compellingly, but the novel is that form in which the common field of the ordinary, imagined as a form of descriptive attention to quotidian detail, has been most persuasively and lastingly represented, via the same

medium as we all bound to use in the specification of our own prosaic environments. As such, the novel is the form in which, through the common art of description – ‘the humblest of intelligent symbolic acts’ – a particular conception of the ordinary has been recorded and made known.<sup>xlvi</sup>

The conception in question has been subject to much scepticism: from those reading for the plot, for whom the potentially interminable itemizing of space and its stuff is not only tedious but also, and quite precisely, surplus to requirements; and for critics, for whom description is one of the chief constitutive marks of the novel’s founding and continued acquisitive individualism. A space or an object described is a space or object made knowable and thereby known. Such is the novel’s claim on, and to, the world. Hence, variously but always sceptically, György Lukács on description’s detemporalizing and dehumanizing orientations, Barthes on description’s work in the naturalising of culture, and Franco Moretti on description’s inherently conservative blocking of history.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Yet there remains the possibility (that at least) of a counter-reading of novelistic description, according to which the novel promises, prosaically but uniquely, a non-acquisitive relation to those environments it details; a marking of the field of the common that does not, in the very act of transcription, make of it something other. The novelised object, descriptively attended, is apparently ‘nothing special’, of a kind of ordinariness the weak provocation of which declines to offer for the onlooker anything by way of social distinction.<sup>xlviii</sup> It is the thing attended, albeit with mild puzzlement: not only at the object of attention but also at one’s noticing and being-with. Attending does not lead toward acquisition or domination, and certainly not to self-confirmingly responsive articulacy. Judgement and knowledge remain elusive; indeed, their remaining so is a mark of the relation, in its relative mildness and indistinctness, and in its being unresolved. Such is the promise, however unrealised or unrealisable.<sup>xlix</sup>

### Sound’s Nondescript

I have sought to corroborate the tendency of a descriptive essaying of L and L’s trilogy towards the realm of the novel, a realm defined in this instance by an ethics of description and of a common ground. Verbal response and audio object have come thus to be interwoven around description’s reach, and its workings. In lieu of an expansive return now to the details of the soundwork, I end with a more generalising summary, beginning with the provocation from Brian Kane that has guided this listening essay:

If there is such a thing as sound art, ‘the message’ must be grounded in the sound... A theory of sound art must take account of sound art as *an art of sounds*, where sounds are heard in all their sociality. A theory of sound art is ultimately justified by its ability to support the description and production of soundworks at the level where individual sounds matter.<sup>1</sup>

It is the possibility and the possible registers of such a description that I have been working here, with the additional fold of the descriptive itself as that which is performed as well as invited by the sounds in question – the field recording as an act of auditory description. While I agree with Kane that we should seek to ‘specify the relation between forms of sociality and the sounds made’, such forms may well turn out to be known to us already as existing mediations or representations. The novel is

of course one such, perhaps the pre-eminent art, in the west, in which ‘forms of sociality’ have been imaginatively inhabited and dramatised. Much field recording-based compositional practice appears to aspire to the formal orientation and affective register of lyric poetry, whereas L and L’s serial collaboration is a triple-decker: expansive and discursive where the tendency in the art form is otherwise, towards precision, reduction and restriction, however forbiddingly or performatively durational; abundantly signifying rather than veiled and abstracted; and unashamedly parochial and anecdotal where contemporaneous work in sound can appear to resist overt anthropocentrism. The anecdotally discursive frame, novelistically loose in form, gathers and holds organised sounds the field of which is a commons of memory and friendship; a shared sounded ground of two together, structurally and experientially, and of the rhythmed symmetries of difference within sameness. The frame is novelistic and so too the sounded field, the latter in the sense of marking a register of ordinary prosaic matter: an unparticularizing sounding of what at this endpoint, and in keeping with the descriptive motif at play throughout this reading, we might nominate as the *nondescript*, a term singularly fitting in the disjunctions of its three meanings: as that which is ‘undistinguished or insignificant’, or is ‘not easily classified... neither one thing nor another’, or ‘has not been previously described’.<sup>li</sup> The nondescript, conceived as an aesthetic category, bespeaks, while maintaining, a perception of the interesting in the trivial, the novel or foreign in the over-known, and the undescribed or undescribable in the not-worth-describing. Or perhaps it is not a relation of one *in* the other, marked here prepositionally, but of one *as* the other; a relation, ‘apparently illogical’, analogous to that of field and event as articulated by Berger and of sounded continuity and intermittence as performed in the trilogy. More particularly, the nondescript is a word helpfully impervious to the potential normativity of a claim on common ground, a means of resisting privatisation and any tendency towards the proprietorial.<sup>lii</sup>

The nondescript, as aesthetic response, is a form of the interesting. It is one field of the interesting, and to that extent it brings us back to the beginning. L and L’s collaborative soundwork is nondescript. Therein lies not only its achievement but also the interestingness of its common field and of that field’s appeal: its attraction and its call. To describe its nondescript audio-description and acknowledge a sometimes nondescript experience of it, in terms of an inherited, culturally resonant idea of the novel, is to situate the sounds socially and to recognize thereby the wordliness of their resonance. The ‘forms of sociality’ heard in L and L’s work are not in themselves uncommon: how could they be, given what is at stake? They are the relational forms of friendship, male friendship in particular, and of domestic and local communal and collaboration;<sup>liii</sup> and the relational forms of the ambient and elemental environments within which sociality comes to happen. The forms are sounded as we listen, causally and figuratively – as we listen for the origin or scenario of the acoustic matter – just as they are when the work is heard structurally and texturally, for the organisation of the material. Sound’s novelty, thus sounded, resides not in the forms themselves but in their singular articulation, what we might call their style: the sounded stylings that make and mark a field of the common. Kathleen Stewart, wishing to notate the fleeting happening in everyday life of what she calls ‘ordinary affects’, looks ‘to fashion some form of verbal address that is adequate to their form’.<sup>liv</sup> Adapting Stewart, we can say that the field recording thus styled by L and L to describe, thereby effecting, a common ground is one such mode of adequacy, as in its own minor way is the descriptive register of encounter essayed here, the latter

being also an attempt to acknowledge ‘the interesting’s lack of descriptive specificity’ while at the same time using that lack as the moving-off point for an account.<sup>iv</sup> The trilogy is to “where the field was” as L is to L: each the other’s commons, each resonantly and hopefully nondescript (‘If All Goes Well’, *Photographs*).

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<sup>i</sup> Jennie Gottschalk, looking to summarise the territory, considers a strain of field recording-based practice under the heading ‘Finding Hidden Sounds’ (*Experimental Music since 1970* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 64-71. Artists mentioned include David Dunn, described as attending to ‘sounds that are difficult to access’, and Jana Winderen, whose own description of her work provides Gottschalk’s heading.

<sup>ii</sup> ‘Inaudibly Loud, Long-Lasting, Far-Reaching’ is the title of a chapter of Douglas Kahn’s *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 201-30. It forms one part of a section devoted to ‘The Impossible Inaudible’. See also Joanna Demers’s characterization of some of the work of Toshiya Tsunoda and Francisco López (*Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 113-34). Demers describes the recordings in question as variously ‘sparse and long-lasting’, ‘of long duration and minute detail’ (p. 125), with sounds including ‘a seven-minute recording of the wind blowing through the rails of a metal footbridge’ (p. 126) and ‘some sort of electrical signal’ heard in a recording ‘with a duration of more than seventeen minutes’ (p. 128).

<sup>iii</sup> Will Montgomery writes of Tsunoda as ‘direct[ing] the ear towards what is not available to ordinary experience’ (‘Beyond the Soundscape: Art and Nature in Contemporary Phonography’, in *The Ashgate Companion to Experimental Music*, ed. by James Saunders (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 145-61, p. 155).

<sup>iv</sup> The ‘merely interesting’ is Sianne Ngai’s term for that peculiarly low-level affective response provoked, for instance, by the ‘look’ of conceptual art (*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 110-73, p. 112).

<sup>v</sup> According to Ngai, the interesting, as a specific form of aesthetic evaluation, is characterized in part by the call for justification it provokes in others: ‘when someone feels compelled to make public his evaluation of an object as interesting, we seem equally compelled to ask immediately: why?’ (p. 169). Hence the auto-interrogation ventriloquised here, and tacitly throughout what follows, in reply to the everyday matter of my having been interested by a particular soundwork.

<sup>vi</sup> *The Breadwinner: Musical Settings for Common Environments and Domestic Situations* (Erstwhile 052, 2008); *Air Supply* (Erstwhile 059, 2010); *Photographs* (Erstwhile 070-2, 2013). *Photographs* comprises two discs. There is also a 7” record of additional material from the collaboration (‘The Food Chain’ / ‘Nice Ass’ (Glistening Examples GLEX1201, 2011)). The trilogy is the subject of a relatively extensive critical literature on-line, to a little of which I make reference below. See in particular Matthew Horne’s review essay, ‘Last a Lifetime’, published in the on-line journal, *surround* (2 (April 2014)) <http://surround.noquam.com/last-a-lifetime/>. Horne cites a number of other on-line responses. The richness of this resource is a reminder that art of this kind is made possible and then sustained by the efforts and enthusiasms of small networks and communities involved at all stages in the life and influence of the work, from artist to listener. The co-option of such work in academic and other institutional forums, however benignly intentioned in terms of advocacy and dissemination, is not without its problems, one small way of mitigating which is to

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acknowledge the already existing critical archive written by those closely and engaged, over time, with the life of the art. For a considered but concerned account of what is at stake in the difficult relation between, on the one hand, communities of practitioners and traditions of practice, and on the other, academically- or institutionally-oriented descriptions of the work in question, see Bradford Bailey's response to Gottschalk's book (<https://blogthehum.wordpress.com/2016/09/19/on-jennie-gottschalks-experimental-music-since-1970/>). Last accessed 21 September 2016).

<sup>vii</sup> 'Records replayed often... construct an object that goes beyond the psychological and material vagaries of each successive listening. There is as yet no word to denote this gradual hollowing out of an imprint, this listening-by-listening constitution of an object that from then on preexists the new act of listening or rather the new audition that will be made from it' (Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. by James A. Steinrager (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 214).

<sup>viii</sup> *Musique concrète* is the term most frequently invoked in on-line critical responses to the trilogy. There is, however, little consensus regarding nomenclature in these areas of contemporary creative practice, and much said against the reductive and potentially misleading effects of categorization. For a recent and helpfully pragmatic overview, see the first chapter of Gottschalk, especially pp. 5-8.

<sup>ix</sup> Gottschalk, who herself coins the felicitous term 'nonfictional music', uses the concepts of 'change' and 'experience' to mark a shared orientation across a range of audio practices towards work 'more grounded in actual lived experience than in musical tradition' (p. 4). Compare Michael Pisaro on 'the unexpected ways of sounding and of being' created by what he calls 'experimental music': 'What emerges is an ever-expanding network of possibilities and of friends, a conspiracy against the way things are, a way of saying: there is also *this*' ('Writing, Music', in Saunders, ed., pp. 27-76, p. 76).

<sup>x</sup> In keeping with this uncertainty, it is perhaps worth nominating a contemporaneous and equally 'interesting' work the sounded field of which is not dissimilar to some parts of that of Lambkin and Lescalleet: Anett Németh's *A Pauper's Guide to John Cage* (Another Timbre atb-08, 2010). The idea of a pauper's guide chimes with the non-pejorative weakness and modesty that characterises, for this listener, the soundwork of the common field recording.

<sup>xi</sup> Ngai, p. 117.

<sup>xii</sup> *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 167.

<sup>xiii</sup> The 'post-medium condition', exemplified in conceptual and digital art, and in installation practice, has long been a dominant signifier of a generalised contemporaneity in the visual arts. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (1979), included in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 19850, pp. 276-90; and for a critical and historicizing account of the concept, Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 72-78 and pp. 99-108.

<sup>xiv</sup> *v-p v-f is v-n* (windsmeasure wm30, 2012). Derek Walmsley notices the 'minimal context... minimalist design and... long durations' that contribute to the 'hushed reverence' characteristic of much recent soundscape-oriented field recordings ('The Field Recordist as Obsessive', *The Wire* (August 2014), [http://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/columns/derek-walmsley\\_the-field-recordist-as-obsessive](http://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/columns/derek-walmsley_the-field-recordist-as-obsessive). Last accessed 7 September 2016).

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<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.erstwhilerecords.com/catalog/052.html> and <http://www.erstwhilerecords.com/catalog/059.html>. Last accessed 1 September 2016.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ngai links the category of the interesting and the serial artwork, according to a shared enactment of ‘betweenness’ (p. 36). On the subject of the series as a distinguishing feature specifically of contemporary art, see Osborne, pp. 62-67.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Private Parts* is an early version of what became a section of Ashley’s television opera, *Private Lives (Private Parts)* (1978-83).

<sup>xviii</sup> The older man pictured drinking from a mug in *Photographs*, so it transpires, is Lambkin’s father, while the other men in one of the companion images are not relatives but Tim Goss and Darren Harris, members of Lambkin’s old band, The Shadow Ring. They are heard on ‘Hotdog Harris or The Road of Remembrance’. I am grateful to Graham Lambkin for help with identifying some of the images, and to Jon Abbey for the original contact.

<sup>xix</sup> Several of the track titles reference late 1970s and early 1980s music: the aforementioned Ashley opera, Fripp/ Eno bootleg and ‘E5150’ by Black Sabbath (released in 1981); ‘Air Supply’ (an Anglo-Australian group prominent at this time); ‘Because the Night’ (the Bruce Springsteen/ Patti Smith song first recorded by Smith late in 1977); and ‘Street Hassle’ (an album and song by Lou Reed, released in 1978).

<sup>xx</sup> ‘A theory of sound art must take account of sound art as *an art of sounds*, where sounds are heard in all their sociality’ (Brian Kane, ‘Musicophobia, or Sound Art and the Demands of Art Theory’, <http://nonsite.org/article/musicophobia-or-sound-art-and-the-demands-of-art-theory>. Last accessed 2 September 2016). Kane’s account of trends in sound studies has informed my thinking.

<sup>xxi</sup> These terms are borrowed, via Chion, from Pierre Schaeffer (Chion, pp. 266-68).

<sup>xxii</sup> Simon Jarvis is one among a number of writers recently to have argued via a rereading of Kant for the ‘the equivocal or speculative character of the field of criticism’, as a necessary acknowledgement of the constitutively experiential and singular, though common, complexion of aesthetic experience (‘An Undelete for Criticism’, *Diacritics* 32.1 (2002): 3-18).

<sup>xxiii</sup> I am drawing here on Sarah Wood’s essay, ‘Anew Again’, in particular, on her reading, via Derrida on ‘the obscure friendship of rhyme’, of the senses of sound (in Sarah Wood and Jonty Tiplady, *The Blue Guitar* (London: Artwords Press, 2007), pp. 18-36, p. 24. Reprinted in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, ed. by Stephen Benson and Clare Connors (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 277-92, p. 283).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Chion, p. 24.

<sup>xxv</sup> ‘Causal listening’ is familiar from Schaeffer. ‘Figurative listening’ is Chion’s term for the mode ‘that may appear identical to causal listening but that has to do not so much with what causes a sound in reality as with what the sound *represents*’ (p. 266). There are of course a number of different versions of these distinctions in the critical literature attendant on sound and phenomenologies of listening.

<sup>xxvi</sup> I refer hereafter to Lambkin and Lescalleet by the shared letter of their respective surnames, an alliteration that presides over the collaboration and its sounding of the same-but-different scenarios of friendship. (‘[L]ike two capital ‘I’s, one erect, one fallen, touching while diverging from another, neither single nor double’. So writes Clare Connors of the shared first letter of Lizzie and Laura, Christina Rossetti’s precursory duo of Ls (*Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), p. 165). The relation of the same-but-different, especially as marked in language, is sounded most overtly in the trilogy in a recording of a voice reciting some of the test words used in

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the Harvard Dialect Survey, an exercise intended to trace variations of dialect across US States ('CT20 1PS / Rinsing Through the Shingles', *Photographs*).

<sup>xxvii</sup> The sound of snoring, as well as being one amongst many drone textures in the work, is a part of the common field of acoustic matter occupied by L and L, and another sounding, albeit congested, of their elemental medium. It is also a pre-emptive acknowledgement of the constitutive proximity of the interesting and the boring.

<sup>xxviii</sup> This is not to disavow the previously acknowledged drones of the work, with their variously ghostly and subaquatic character (Horne refers to the 'disquieting atmosphere' of the first two parts of the trilogy, and refers in passing to similar responses from other listeners); and yet even these sounds are frequently framed or interrupted in such a way as to puncture any inclination towards a generic uncanniness of sound.

<sup>xxix</sup> Demers is one among many writers to use site and situation as the organizing terms for conceiving recent work in 'sound art', including field recording-based practice ('Site in Ambient, Soundscape, and Field Recordings', *Listening Through the Noise*, pp. 113-34). She proposes an understanding of 'site-specific sound art' as 'any art that *in some manner*... addresses the topics of site and location' (p. 125). See also, for example, Gottschalk, pp. 227-81, and Michael Pisaro et al., 'What is Field?', *Wolf Notes* 5 (2013), pp. 16-27 (PDF downloaded from: <https://wolfnotes.wordpress.com/wolf-notes/>).

<sup>xxx</sup> Compare Chion's use of the metaphor of the imprint with that of Sébastien Biset, who applies it specifically to the field recording, which, 'by extending the microphone towards the world seeks to seize the imprint of the immediate surroundings' ('Experimental of Experiential: Exploratory Perspectives and Tactics for Music Conceptualized as Experience', trans. by David Vaughn, *Tacet* 2 (2012): 126-53, p. 135).

<sup>xxxi</sup> 'The question of description is an exasperating one: not only where to begin to describe, but, at each beginning, why precisely there?' (Louis Marin, 'The Ends of Interpretation, or the Itineraries of a Gaze in the Sublimity of a Storm' (1981), *On Representation*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 173-201, p. 178. I have been influenced in thinking about sound's description by Marin's several essays on the far more firmly established matter, albeit still contested, of painting and its verbal description.

<sup>xxxii</sup> For a polemical account of the anti-description argument as related specifically to sound, see Chapter 5, 'Authoritarian Listening', of François J. Bonnet's *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago*, trans. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), pp. 195-259. The 'verification, decoding, reading' that collectively characterize discursive listening is, for Bonnet, '*a form of deafness*' (p. 204). Marin, faced with a single painted image – Giorgione's *Tempesta* – and considering the chances of description, worries away at a justification: 'Why write to express the pleasure taken in this painting, its particular quality, which varies, however, from one reading to the next? But perhaps it is necessary to write in order to know something about the painting, even though no knowledge is purely knowledge, no factual knowledge is without its own special affect' (p. 174).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Listening and its not* is the title of the score and of an accompanying book comprising a number of texts written in response to the former's instruction (*Listening and its not*, edited by Patrick Farmer (n.p.: SARU & Compost and Height, 2016)).

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Farmer, pp. 55-58.

<sup>xxxv</sup> We might compare Farmer's prompt with the following account by Daniela Cascella: 'When I listen and then I write, the point is in sustaining a double movement of estrangement from, and recognition of, sounds, which does not call for a synaesthesia but for a cohabitation of worlds' (*En abîme: Listening, Reading, Writing: An Archival Fiction* (London: Zero Books, 2012), p. 73). Cascella's double occupancy is performed in various registers over the course of her book (see especially chapters 6 and 7).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Expression and Truth: On the Music of Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), p. 19. New or cultural musicology, that wholesale critique of the established traditions of formalist and positivist writing on music, involved in part a turn, or return, to the possibilities as interpretation of the non-technical description of musical works and experiences. Ekphrasis, as one term for such writing, thus has significant potential for a critic of Kramer's orientation (see *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) pp. 11-28; and *Expression and Truth*, pp. 13-23). Allied to this potential is a corresponding scepticism regarding what Kramer identifies as an idealizing strain in recent philosophically-oriented writing about sound and listening, such as is evident in Bonnet's wide-ranging and suggestive *The Order of Sounds*. See, for example, Kramer's reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* (*Expression and Truth*, pp. 142-45).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Farmer's score might be read as an instance in sound practice of the 'ekphrastic fear' identified by W.J.T. Mitchell as one of three modes characteristic of the historical discourse on the relation between the verbal and the visual. The fear in question is of the 'collapse' of distinctions between the two, with all the 'dangerous promiscuity' that might ensue. 'Hope' – of a benign union of the verbal and the non-verbal – and 'indifference' – as to the ultimate impossibility of relation between media – are the two other discursive tendencies (W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representations* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1995), pp. 151-81). For a reading of Mitchell's essay in relation to descriptions of music, see Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, pp. 16-20.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Mitchell, p. 156.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'Description Without Place' (London: Faber, 2006), pp. 339-46, p. 344. For a brief discussion of the Stevens in relation specifically to conceptions of the field recording as itself an act of description, see Pisaro's comments in 'What is Field?' (p. 19). For a fascinating argument in favour of attending acceptingly to our everyday lexicon of sound, see Chion's chapter, 'Between Doing and Listening: Naming' (pp. 212-42).

<sup>xl</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970), trans. by Richard Miller (London: Blackwell, 1990), p. 80.

<sup>xli</sup> Cage's text score is included in the documentation for the reissue of his 1979 recording of *Roaratorio* (pp. 59-61) (*Roaratorio; Laughtears; Writing for the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake* (Mode 28/29, 2002)).

<sup>xlii</sup> The score, potentially performable using any written work, did in fact follow in the wake of *Roaratorio*, a nicely Cagean reversal of the conventional compositional relationship of text and sound.

<sup>xliii</sup> Pisaro describes *Private Parts* as a 'meditation', 'philosophical in orientation' ('Writing, Music', p. 52). The link specifically with opera, as subject, is my own addition).

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<sup>xliv</sup> ‘Description as a recording device is one of our most fundamental’ (Shirley MacWilliam, ‘Pythagoras’s Screen’, *Parallax* 12.4 (2006), 4-11, p. 7.

<sup>xlv</sup> ‘The first event [drawing one’s attention to the field] may be almost anything, provided that it is not in itself overdramatic’ (Berger, ‘Field’).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for America Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 43.

Description, in being for Fletcher a singularly humble mode, is ‘common’; and ‘because it *is* so common, its possible range alludes us’.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Lukács, ‘Narrate or Describe?’ (1936), *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. by Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Merlin, 1978), pp. 110-48; Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’ (1968), trans. by Richard Howard, in *The Novel: an Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Dorothy J. Hale (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), pp. 230-34; Moretti, ‘Serious Century’, in *The Novel: Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) pp. 364-400.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Cascella writes movingly of the apparent ordinariness of the already known in listening: ‘Nothing special. What is special about this nothing is how I get there, and what I make of the experience of listening every time I return’ (p. 92).

<sup>xlix</sup> I am drawing freely here, in this over-hasty and -generalising summary, on Hannah Freed-Thall’s *Spoiled Distinctions: Aesthetics and the Ordinary in French Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Ngai’s *Our Aesthetic Categories*, the latter specifically for its account of the category of the interesting.

<sup>1</sup> Kane.

<sup>li</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. It perhaps goes without saying that little of note has been written on the nondescript, Virginia Woolf’s ‘cotton wool’ notwithstanding. One exception is Fletcher’s chapter, ‘Description’, in which ‘a major artistic category of the nondescript’ is proposed as a means of accounting for an ‘uncanny’ ‘excess’ in certain representations of the ordinariness of the natural world, an excess at odds with received registers of the sublime and the picturesque (*A New Theory*, pp. 42-56). Suggestively novel as it is, Fletcher’s account, in its reliance on a numinous plenitude, is decidedly at odds with the nondescript as articulated here.

<sup>lii</sup> Compare the nondescript with a number of similar, although not identical, nominations of recent years, including the interesting (Ngai), the neutral (Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)), and the *quelconque* (the history and several formulations of which are summarised by Freed-Thall (pp. 6-12)). Joanna Demers makes a not unrelated case for the ‘meaningless’ in music and soundwork (‘On Meaninglessness’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23 (2011), 195-99).

<sup>liii</sup> Novels on the subject of male friendship are surprisingly rare. If L and L’s serial work is in one sense a sounding of certain ideas related to novelness, it is more specifically a piece in the form and substance of which male friendship is variously acknowledged, dramatised and performed. One element of the experience of friendship over time is of course loss, in its different forms, together with what endures through memory – including the resonant music of childhood – and what can stand as memorial. While I haven’t concentrated on these aspects here, they are repeatedly sounded in the trilogy, movingly so, as testified to in much of the on-line commentary (see Horne).

<sup>liv</sup> Stewart, p. 4.

<sup>lv</sup> Ngai, p. 241.