

ERIC BELL
SOUNDS AND MATERIAL SIGNS

KELLY WOOD & MONIKA GRZYMALA

18 JANUARY – 16 FEBRUARY 2008

Speaking of phonographic recording in “The Form of the Phonograph Record” (1934), Theodor Adorno writes, “the possibility of inscribing music without it ever having sounded has simultaneously reified it in an even more inhuman manner and also brought it mysteriously closer to the character of writing and language.”¹ For Adorno, phonographic inscription may be considered a “true language” as it entails an absolute connection between a given physical marking, which one may liken in linguistic terms to a signifier, and its corresponding sound/reality. The writing on a phonograph record “relinquishes its being as mere signs: [it is] inseparably committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove.”² As opposed to musical notation, which is composed of arbitrary signs for music, phonographic inscriptions are acoustic signatures. Adorno’s use of photographic analogies to describe the character of the phonograph record contribute to this notion of an immediate relationship between the markings on the surface of a phonograph record and the acoustic object it records. Like an “acoustic photograph,” Adorno writes, the phonograph record is a “two-dimensional model of a reality that can be multiplied without limit, displaced both spatially and temporally, and traded on the open market.”³ Applied specifically to linguistic understandings of phonographic inscription, photographic analogies suggest that, as a product of a similar automatic analogue recording device, there is an intimate and direct physical relationship between the written image on a phonograph record and the object it records. One could say, with reference to Roland Barthes’ “The Photographic Message” (1961), that for Adorno, the phonograph record conveys the “literal reality” of music.⁴ As a writing that surpasses notions of linguistic signification, phonographic inscription is not without theological implications and utopian significance. Adorno suggests that when music becomes “fixed” as writing, it holds the potential to “become readable as the

‘last remaining universal language since the construction of the tower’.”⁵

Though the product of a fundamentally different technology, Kelly Wood’s *Binary Sound Series* (2008) evokes multiple points of comparison to Adorno’s concept of the phonograph record as an “acoustic photograph” comprised of a writing that has a direct physical relationship to the thing it communicates. Each image in the *Binary Sound Series* consists of a digital song file in its most basic form—binary code—digitally printed on photographic paper. Apart from Wood’s selection of music, all aesthetic decisions, including the scale and dimensions of each image, are left to the computer: what is presented is merely the raw data in all of its sublime plenitude. As music contained in binary form that has literally been printed on a page, the images in the *Binary Sound Series* carry linguistic associations similar to those of phonographic inscription discussed in “The Form of the Phonograph Record.” Although digital code does not retain the immediate connection to its object of communication that is associated with analogue technology, the fact that each image in the *Binary Sound Series* contains distinct forms and possesses a particular character suggests that their relation to music exceeds notions of signification. In the work, music appears not merely as encoded information, but also as a physical imprint in digital code. Like the surface of a phonograph record, the printed code appears to act as a physical medium in which material forms corresponding to sound are inscribed. Though, as a result of being encoded, music is not immanent in images in the *Binary Sound Series* in the same way that it is immanent in the writing on a phonograph record—the binary code comprising each image is, after all, simply a set of instructions for a computer. The fact that some residual trace of the music can be seen in the images suggests that they are not mere signs for music. Containing a writing that can be seen to

physically correspond to the thing it transmits, the work has similar mystical linguistic implications to those of phonographic inscription discussed by Adorno. Like Ernst Chladni's sound figures,⁶ which Adorno refers to, quoting the German physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter, as "script-like Ur-images of sound,"⁷ images in the *Binary Sound Series* call to mind the possibility of a writing in which each sound has a form that corresponds directly to it.

As two-dimensional models of music, images in the *Binary Sound Series*, like the phonograph record, bring to mind the notion of an acoustic photograph. Such analogies with photography are reinforced by Wood's use of contemporary photographic materials and printing processes. In addition to possessing a mysteriously intimate connection to each piece of music, images in the *Binary Sound Series* also collapse the temporal dimension of their musical object in a manner similar to photography. In each image, impalpable, sequential digital information—encoded music—is transformed into concrete, simultaneous visual phenomena. Like the phonograph record, the images present, to use Adorno's words, "time as evanescence, enduring in mute music."⁸

Although the work compels photographic analogies, such comparisons ultimately do little to make the images more accessible. Like the multitude of inscrutable, technologically generated images present around us, whether accidental (as glitches, interference, static) or intentionally produced (data matrix codes come to mind), the *Binary Sound Series* maintains a semblance of autonomy characteristic of visual

phenomena produced without human intervention or regard for human consumption. If the work has theological significance related to its linguistic implications, it may have more to do with the illegibility of the images than the notion that the writing contained within them approaches the character of a "true language." Presenting digitally mediated information in its most basic, indecipherable form, images in the *Binary Sound Series* are, in a particular way, emblematic of a technological process that evokes notions of Babel. Considered in linguistic terms, digital modes of information storage function as a kind of alkahest, reducing all communicable objects into a common form (namely binary code) lacking in human meaning. For its symbolic baggage—its association with notions of a universal language—music is a particularly significant object of digital translation. At least on a metaphorical level, the *Binary Sound Series* presents the corruption of one language by another, resulting in images that are not only confusing in the sense that they are indecipherable, but also confusing in a constructive sense. Though much is lost in the translation of music into graphic binary code (most obviously sound), such a process also results in a confluence of meanings: each piece of music and its corresponding graphic form evokes a range of associations. Ultimately, however, one is confronted with the silence of the individual images. While referential titles and visual analogies may provide a basis for reading the work, each image remains complete on its own terms as a technological inscription addressed to no human reader. Such is their mysterious perfection and their beauty.

NOTES

1. Theodor Adorno, "The Form of the Phonograph Record" (1934), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 60.
2. *Ibid.*, 59.
3. *Ibid.*, 57.
4. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 17.
5. Adorno, 59.
6. Ernst Chladni (1756–1827) was a German physicist and inventor of musical instruments. He is best known for his experiments with

sound in which he covered metal plates with sand and caused them to resonate at various audible frequencies. The patterns that formed on the plates as a result, known as "Chladni figures," attracted public attention and led to discussions of a primordial language originating from acoustic vibrations. The influence of Chladni's experiments can be seen in the writings of Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776–1810), who was inspired by the work to search for an original or natural writing through experiments with electricity. See Steve McCaffery and Jed Rasula, "Retentions and Secretions," in *Imagining Language: An Anthology*, ed. Steve McCaffery and Jed Rasula (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 477.

7. Adorno, 60.

8. *Ibid.*, 58.