
Noise Picture Method: A Manifesto?

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This is the world of noise, the noise world, where too much is happening and nothing needs to be seen. No one tells you where to look, human pictures and messages announce themselves everywhere, wishing so much to mean something while the words only serve to obliterate any real meaning of the world's necessity to be one way and not any other. All we have created is a world of possibility, with no choice more necessary than any other.

Noise! That insult you want to shut out, that blur in the scene, what makes it impossible for you to focus. What is this picture about? you always wanted to ask. No more. Subjects are not clear when you can't see the forest for the trees. There are no figures or grounds anymore, just the *blur*, the overload, too much information, weighing down the senses with confusion.

Noise is not a mask, no one ever said it was invisible. It even comes in colors. White noise is the same whether you speed it up or slow it down. Pink noise has some flavor to it, be careful what you taste. Your empty picture is "the color of television, tuned to a dead channel," as William Gibson began his *Neuromancer*, a cybermetaphor that seems easy today to anyone who glues their eyes to the screen to work or to play. Clear, exact, pure, the digital image just wants noise to enliven it, give it some of the grit of reality which it so often lacks.

Photography changed painting by claiming to instantly present the real, suddenly cast into an image! We've always wanted to trust the picture. And the more perfect the picture, the less we can be sure of its truth. Of course by now the gathering of the light on the world into images is just one of many tools, printed and plastered all over our walls, packing space in our hard drives, coursing through wires and satellites and residing in cyberplacelessness. Press a button and your image can be there too. Everywhere and nowhere.

What's that? A glitch, a snap, the screen turns blank, it pixillates colors of all kinds. Tutti frutti noise, racks of Hawaiian shirts. Colors that don't mix, pictures no one in their right mind would put together. That's the way they come in our world, channel-surfed, quick changing, out of control.

Why just one image when in a second we could change to another? Answer: to have time to seek out the noise. To listen to the fizz in the picture, the drone in the gallop, the turbocharged escape.

We always wanted better toys but have never been impressed when they work perfectly. The fuzzy image suggests many truths, the twisted story admits many endings and many beginnings, we just grab for a piece of it in the middle when we wish.

Sure the visual has been abstract for a century, as art has turned itself into design. Abstract expressionism graces our shower curtains and the lining of coats. Photography has taken pains to distinguish itself from this noisy mess, but it won't be able to hold out. Even the most infinitesimal exposure produces a haze-between living reality and frozen memory.

Think of the incessant noise of our world that we will never hear! The millions of streaming radio waves, the sudden links of illicit wireless phone conversations creating a private web of lines crisscrossing the cities and the satellites of space. Make it all visible and you would be unable to see the face of the person right in front of you, staring into your eyes. The noise of unseeable sound would in itself be too much to take.

But why is it that people so often see clear images when they hear the strangest of sounds? Noise isn't just confusion to pure music, but the real substance of our contemporary soundscape. That's the landscape around you when your eyes are closed and you are only listening. It's not always direct. Painful sounds may suggest beautiful places. If a machine screams in the middle of the night, for hours without stopping in the heart of a factory, does anyone hear it? Is the picture of the metal womb silent?

Noise in writing is punctuated by distractions. The story is no longer as important as the synchronicity of surprise insights that come through the accidental mess of all the discombobulated senses. There is too much going on not to notice something. And yet we are trained to tune out, to focus, to get from point A to point B. When faced with wonder we walk on.

Take a listen from music, and hear what it means for an art form to open up. Where once only pure sounds, mixed according to careful rules of harmony and dissonance were desired, now music has expanded to accept sounds of the environment, both earthly and mechanical, into its material.

Run across the highway, dodge the cars, slink into the forest. A few meters in there's a place where the swish of machines mixes exactly with the cheeps of birds and the swish of wind through the trees. Which kind of sound is the noise? Which noises are produced without purpose? For noise to be noise it must be a distraction from your purpose. Otherwise it is just sound. And 'organized sound' is still the best definition of music around. This is an art that has come to encompass noise, once every sound seems to have a place in the mix, a reason to be heard.

If you visited John Cage, celebrated composer and musical *philosophe* of our time, you might have been surprised to find that he had no devices in his apartment to play music of any kind. No CD's, no records, no cassettes, no DAT's. "What do you do to hear music, John?" "Simple," he would say. "All I have to do is open the window," and at once the zenlike stillness would be chafed by the screech of tires on the street, the honks of horns, the shouts of childrens, the hawkings of sidewalk vendors six floors below. "This," he would gently smile, "is all the music I need?"

Who are we to call it all noise? It's the greatest achievement to be able to hear the sounds of the world, all the sounds, as part of some vast musical composition with no beginning or end, but infinite nuance, endless layers and parts in the score. "You must free yourself," said Cage some more, "from your likes and your dislikes." Your ears are trained when you can take it *all* in, not just what you like to hear.

Try it with what we see. In a world so full of images we can easily take the image for granted. Nothing is impressive as a technique anymore, nothing can be certain to be real. The point of reproduction is not to claim anything is *exactly* represented. It's all changed into a confusion of pictures deriving from the capturing of reality, ending up somewhere different and unclear. Marshall McLuhan distrusted the exactness of the printed word, calling it *hot media* when what he wanted was the *cool*. He liked television because it was so fuzzy and weak. He wouldn't like it today now that it is so glitzy and exact. The more uncertain and

imperfect the media, the more it might be likely to transcend its own limitations. What he called the cool we can call the noisy, the noised, the noising, the refrigerator turning itself on out of sleep in the middle of the night.

You can find noise with the first light or you can add it if the picture emerged too clear. The photographer still in some sense captures an image, and once than image is in the cage, there may be imperfections, glitches, distractions that you might be inclined to erase or crop out. If you truly accept the noise of the world, will you still want to do that? Or might you want to add more noise to what snapshots have made all too painfully obvious and easy, the photograph taken for granted as a piece of the world as it is, an excuse, an easy substitute for the fluid halls of memory that are always reshaping and revising the truth of what happened.

For in the end, noise can mean at least two things. It's that extraneous sound that annoys us, that threatens to get in the way of the silence of the image, the quiet inherent in color or black and white. Or, it's something new to wake up to, to choose as a subject. A material for artistry too long overlooked by those seeking out pictures. As music comes to embrace many more possibilities of sound, so too will the image. As borders between ways of making images also come to blur, so to will the increase of cacophonous confusion come as media continue to blend and mix all the more.

So don't rush to erase the noise. Listen to it. Look at it. Turn it up.

There will be no subject, no object. Look in the corner of the picture, at the edges, all around. There will be no figure to hold onto, no sense of ground to set the state. Images of noise reflect the confusion that is reality.

Noise is a fact of life. Nothing is pure, nothing is clean or silent. Photographs always claim to be a bit closer to reality than other images. Light has made them, not just the hand of the practiced artist. But the only kind of light pictures that are honest are those that accept that the world is a mess, that nothing can be isolated from its turbid location. You want to pinpoint it, call it exact *ambiguity*, the precise confusion at the heart of the world.

The image screams. It deafens the eyes. Wipe away the tears, pull yourself together, and you will see that there is always something there, an amazing anomaly to keep looking at, to hold your attention, to break the continuous hum of the blue or gray sky. Noise keeps the world interesting, makes it impossible for us to pass off any image as a convincing substitute.

As long as there's a scratch on the negative, a hiss on the tape, a glaring imperfection, then you know, there's a chance the image before you might be real. The more we're able to look at, to accept within the frame, the more we've learned how to see beyond its messy edge.

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