

# [Writing ...]

**Lisa Dotzauer**

**'Opus1'**

Contemporary Studies and Critical Theory

W R I T I N G ...

I'm all in favor of keeping  
dangerous weapons out of  
the hands of fools. Let's start  
with typewriters.

Frank Lloyd Wright

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What is architecture if music is frozen architecture??

[Writing ...] (or 'Opus 1') is a short black and white film, about 8 minutes and 25 seconds in length, which deals with the enquiry of natural sound(s), their "musical" potential and their visual representation in our world now and today. The investigation touches readings of Derrida's "*Of Grammatology*" and originates with a quote about writing by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

[Writing ...] ends with an open question considering the nature of architecture based on a quote by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

The film involves personal contributions of the addressees<sup>i</sup> and evokes a new and always different understanding. It plays with the concepts of the "Now and here"

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<sup>i</sup> "Addressee/s" is used and refers to viewers and listeners of [Writing ...] as the work requires both senses (vision and audition) in challenging equal manners.

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(Unique time - Unique Place - Unique Experience):

Each screening is different, each individual experience is exclusive to oneself- everything is in a constant moment of change, in motion, even though it is written down (and left its stationary marks).

Each addressee is issued with a pair of soft disposable ear plugs / ear defenders and is instructed to start wearing them with the commencement of the presentation and as long as they feel comfortable with during the screening. The emphasis here lies on the personal involvement of the addressees; there is not *right-or-wrong-moment* to stop wearing the ear plugs.

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The foundation of [Writing ...] lay in an investigation of passages of '*The outside and the Inside*' and '*The Outside Is the Inside*', written by Jacques Derrida (in "*Of Grammatology*", Chapter Two: Linguistics and Grammatology) and Goethe's famous words:

*"I call music frozen architecture."*

My personal understandings, interrogations and readings of further information

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construct another layer of the work, including paragraphs of Oliver Sacks' book *Musicophilia – Tales of Music and the Brain*.

The screening of the film took place in the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2009 at Thames Valley University (TVU), on Reading's Kings Road Campus as part of series of four visual and auditory presentations questioning natural sound.

[Writing ...] and its intentions can be divided into two main categories:  
a) the meaning of the work itself (here being both on paper and in motion), the film, and

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b) the presentation of the movie and supporting material (i.e. the earplugs and the score).

The film. After discussions and lecture on the nature or “character” of natural sound(s) I started my own enquiries into the subject, which then led me to the creation of [Writing ...].

One of my questions was (and to some level still is) to what extent we could call sounds natural? If we consider all the sounds that are made by “living beings” natural, then what is not a natural sound? And does this in return then mean that all sounds made by “not living being” are non-natural? Or are they un-natural? If I build a machine, which runs on fossil fuels (once being a “living organism”) would the sounds it emits be natural or non-natural? Technically, the machine is a mechanical object, but on the other hand organic resources were used to build the machine and it uses organic matter to power itself. Should I not call the sounds “organic/mechanical sounds”?

Let's say this *mechanical* subject is actually my Olivetti *Valentine* typewriter<sup>ii</sup> and the *organic* matter is the oil that is used to lubricate the keys, then the sounds I create by simply using the machine should be consider both, "~~organic/mechanic~~". Furthermore, the typewriter was designed by a human being, Ettore Sottsass, and I use it to type, which then adds further layers of *organic-ness*. Are the sounds by the *Valentine* therefore natural or non-natural? Can this "recipe" also be applied to writing by hand?

It seems that this is a classic "hen-and-egg"<sup>iii</sup> or "catch 22"<sup>iv</sup> issue, hence I created [Writing ...], which tries to question those issues outlined above. The film invites the addressees to observe me creating sounds through writing and typing, as well as generating movement.

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<sup>ii</sup> I used a typewriter rather than a computer because I enjoy the physical involvement with the machine. It is very similar to comparing the photographer's engagement with an old box camera and a digital camera. Nowadays, all we need to do is press a button and the machine does the rest. Early cameras and typewriters engage the user to a far more physical extend, *you* actually create, not the machine. Furthermore, my presentation plays around a quote by Frank Lloyd Wright, in which he mentions typewriters.

<sup>iii</sup> The question of what developed first, the hen or the egg.

<sup>iv</sup> A problem that seems to never end, one solution creates another problem, which then starts another "round" of questioning.

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The film was shot from a stationary point in a room, only showing parts of a desk and a few *writing tools*, such as pen and paper, a mobile phone, a laptop. The viewer observes one particular setting, an “institutionalised moment” – in Lydia Goehr’s words: “*framed by institutional time and space*”<sup>v</sup>. Everything that happens in these minutes is designed and thought about: I move, I write, I type, I think. I have specified the time and space of [Writing ...] and invite addressees to witness what I have controlled.

By filming these events, I have validated them, I have confirmed what happened, I have “written” my response in a digital format. These actions won’t change, they are stationary objects/concepts, and they are history.

The screening. The showing of [Writing ...] on the other hand is always different and changing. A different audience will view the work on different times of the day. Each person will have unique experience when watching and

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<sup>v</sup> Goehr used these words to refer to John Cage’s famous work: 4’33”.

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engaging with the film and using the supplied ear plugs.

I am interested in the contribution of individuals towards my designs as I believe that design should never “stop” or “finish” as such, thus the ear plugs and the invitation to take them out whenever one feels like. This “beyond-my-own-control”-process creates a far more interesting overall response to a given design, as long as I am in control of the necessary elements my creations.

Especially as my presentation was a pre-recorded sequence of events, I was able to observe addressee’s reactions towards my thoughts.

Conclusions. When [Writing ...] is first viewed, it appears slow, almost like nothing seems to happen. It features “long stretches” of no movement or happening, such as the starting sequence before the lights have been switched on. I specifically didn’t give any instructions on viewing the work. I did not ask the addressees to wear the earplugs at particular times, nor did I ask anyone to pay any attention towards [Writing ...], in order to observe behaviour(s) towards

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the film. I included these “long stretches of nothing’ness” so everyone engaging with the work would not have to deal with too much information at once, such as viewing and listening. Furthermore, when nothing seems to happen during a film, one starts to wonder why nothing is happening, if this might actually be a joke or if something is broken. Those mental processes will have an effect on the body, which then can be listened to, if one chooses to do so. Arguably, if I don’t know that I should listen to myself, I won’t start to do so. On the other hand, if I know I have to listen to myself, I will do so consciously and then might miss the otherwise unconscious realised sounds. [Writing ...] is based on “*famous words by famous people*”, which ties in with my investigations and readings of Derrida’s “*Of Grammatology*”. [Writing ...] offers an insight into my thinking and understanding of the course material and shows my ideas. Even though the film itself exceeded the given time guideline slightly, [Writing ...] is, in my opinion, a successful response to the given assignment. I chose to “elongate” the movie, and in respect of this the whole presentation, for a purpose

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that I made clear earlier on.

The three dimensional score also supports and underlines my presentation, especially as almost everyone engaged with after the screening (this being the main idea behind it.)

The SUPPORTING FABRIC / The SMALL PRINT

The "Sound of Writing".

In Derrida's text passages "The Outside and the Inside" and 'The Outside ~~Is~~ the Inside', Derrida challenges Saussure's concepts of writing and proposes that (the connection between) language (and writing) is not as "black and white" and definite as Saussure has anticipated. The following quotes illustrate Derrida's way of thinking:

*"... Saussure takes up the traditional definition of writing which, already in Plato and Aristotle, was restricted to the model of phonetic script and language of words. Let us recall the Aristotelian definition: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental exercise and written words are the symbols of spoken words." Saussure: "Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the*

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*second exists for the sole purpose of representing first.” ...“*

*“... It is clear that the concepts of stability,, permanence, and duration, which here assist thinking relationships between speech and writing, are too lax and open to every uncritical investiture. ...”*

After reflecting on Derrida’s words, this might mean that speech in “itself” is writing and/or mark-making on a less visual, but auditory level. Here, writing being the exterior (“shell” or “skin”) of the interior (“world”) which consists of language and thoughts, in very crude terms similar to a soap bubble filled with air.

Saussure suggests in his *Course in General Linguistics* that language consists of signs and a sign existing through and consisting because of the interaction of the signifier and signified. Derrida challenges this view and encourage a different approach:

*“... What do these limits and presuppositions signify? First that a linguistic sign is not general as long as it defines its outside and inside in terms of determined linguistic models; ...  
...The system of writing in general is not exterior to the system of language in general, unless it is granted that the division between exterior and interior passes through the interior of the interior and the exterior of the exterior, to the point where the immanence of language is essentially exposed to the intervention of forces*

*that are apparently alien to its system. ...”*

According to Derrida, writing is not an “image” or “symbol” of language in general, such as Aristotle and Saussure had suggested, unless the underlying functions, the nature and logic are to be reconsidered and rethought.

*“... Writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true. ...”*

#### Confirmation = Words.

We are confronted by “writing” on a daily basis. We might write ourselves, observe others writing or read written words.

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Derrida suggests that speech itself is writing. One could argue that walking along a path is writing. “Writing” is *here, there and everywhere* around us. When we write, we confirm. This might take shape in a written confirmation for a doctor’s appointment, results of a laboratory experiment, a printed train or bus ticket or even the street signs we should obey. When we write, we confirm.

So how is [Writing ...] (or ‘Opus 1’) related to such discussions?

#### A “Skeleton of Sound”.

The film itself can be separated into seven activities and/or states, which in turn represent

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the “key notes” for the score:

No Lights  
Main Light on  
Main and Desk light on  
Writing (by hand)  
Moving  
Reading  
Typing (on a typewriter)  
Thinking

Each individual state an/or activity is represented by linear thread creation stitched onto a soft, ever-changing cotton cube, which forms the score.

A “Huggable Score”.

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The score exists as a three dimensional object. It can be touched, moved, thrown, hugged, squashed, flattened, photocopied, drawn, stretched or just left alone, but it still survives in a three dimensional space – it is never just reduced to two dimensions.

The fundamental geometrical form of the score can be traced back to the concept of a cube. The cube in turn representing (or standing in for) the notion of an architectural construction, such as a room, which has been reduced to its very basics: 6 flat surfaces cornering and creating a space.

The choice for an architectural representation of a space has its roots in my thoughts on Goethe’s words about “frozen music” – with my main question being: “What is architecture if music is frozen architecture?”

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Would we then see architecture as a *thawed result* of music or would we refer to it as a *freezer-burned-long-overdue composition*?

A quick note on nature.

As previously mentioned the “character” or nature of natural sounds form part of my investigation. Earlier on, I questioned whether man-made objects and their sounds, such as the clicking of a typewriter, could be consider natural sounds. But what about sounds created by actual living beings – creatures with brains, such as birds singing? In order to gain some understanding I started reading *Musicophilia – Tales of Music and the Brain* by Neurologist Oliver Sacks, a book about music and its effects on the human brain. Sacks’ interests are far more neurological and scientific than my own, but the following quote points towards a common direction in thinking:

*“While birdsong has obvious adaptive uses (in courtship, or aggression, or staking out territory, etc) it is relatively fixed in structure and to nervous system (although there are very few songbirds which seem to improvise, or sing duets). The origin of human music is less easy to understand. Darwin himself was evidently puzzled, as he wrote in The Decent of Man: “As neither the enjoyment nor the capacity of producing musical notes are faculties of the least use to man ... they must be ranked among the most mysterious with which he is endowed.””*

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During reading Sacks' book I started to think about whether humans may also be "hardwired" to some extent and whether this could then be classed as "natural sound". In *Musicophilia* Sacks describes how some people, including professional musicians, can hear, compose or rehearse musical pieces in their heads without the need of an instrument. This information underlines my investigation into "body-generated" sounds, such as one's own heartbeat or the sound of breathing.

In order to listen to such sounds one would need to "shut the doors round oneself" - shut off the external noises and start to listen towards the inside.

As the studio at TVU is not "sound-proof" or even quite (air-conditioning noises, people interaction with each other, etc.) I decided to supply ear protectors / plugs which will reduce the exterior noise to a minimum and the addressees can start listening to their own body.

#### The idea of movement.

The cube's surface is made out of cotton, which is stitched together from a basic net and filled with fire retardant polystyrene beads (= "bean bag filling") and 250g of freeze dried peas. The combination of the filling allows the score to be light enough as well as having some weight or body behind it, which creates a constant changing representation or presence. The tactile experience the cube is offering is always shifting, indicating the unique experience each addressee will gain.

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The seven key activities and/or states displayed in the movie are shown as stitched lines on the cubes surface.

The lines don't conform to any particular area, they move almost freely from one side to another, and took inspiration in fictional treasure maps. On such maps, the journey to the gold and jewels is often indicated by a broken line, mimicking footsteps: a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional happening (= the journey). The stitching of the lines represents a further reference to Derrida's thoughts on the exterior and interior of language and writing.

#### The "Concept(s) of the Thread".

Each stitch leads the thread (= the separation between outside and inside) through the exterior of the exterior into the interior of the interior, with the cotton surface representing the system of 'writing' and the bean bag filling indicating the system of language.

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We are living in an informative and confirmative "sound - environment" which is not "sound-proof": We confirm the world around us and our place in it through visual and auditory stimuli. We can hear sounds and perhaps decide to listen to them more carefully.

The cubical score resembles the room (or space) around us, with its 'walls' being blank canvases on which sound bounces off and leaves its mark so we can confirm the world around and our place in it [see Appendix I, Image I-VI].

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# Appendix I

Image I-IV: "The Huggable Score"



Image I



Image II

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Image III



Image IV

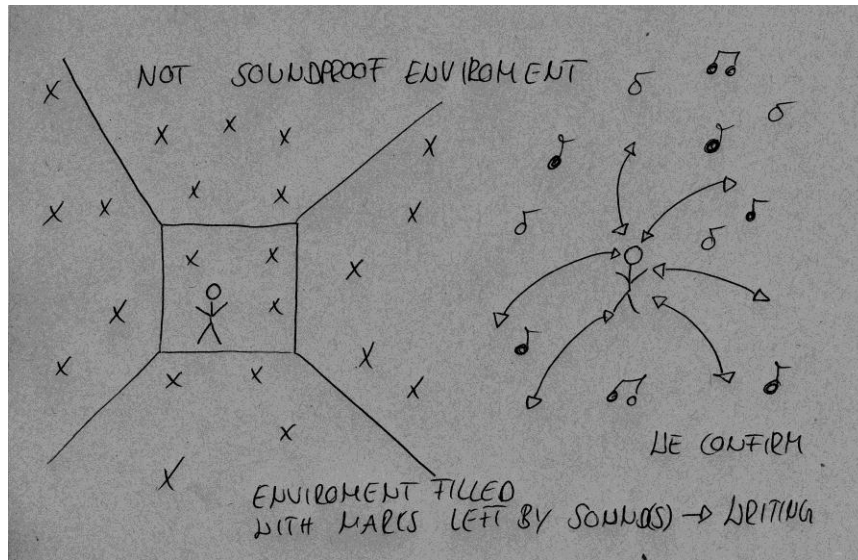
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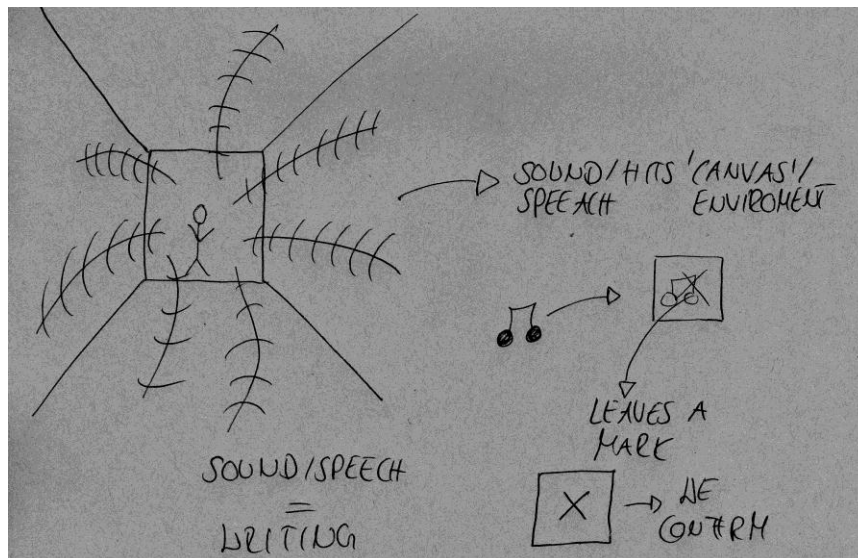
# Images V-VI : Illustration "Sound Bouncing"

Image V



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Image VI



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