



Cognizant Perception:  
The Case for a  
Critical-Affective Ambience

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## THE BOOK

Kim-Cohen, Seth. *Against Ambience and Other Essays*.

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.



In his collection of essays, Seth Kim-Cohen (2016) argues “against ambience,” an aesthetic category he discerns as prevalent in the lately flourishing field of sound art. Situating the emergence of this field in the iconoclastic movements of the 1960s — in particular the development of Conceptualism, Site-Specificity, and Institutional Critique — Kim-Cohen bemoans the current turn away from the self-reflexive criticality of post-Conceptualism. Sound art in the 21st century, he laments, is styled in a retrograde manner as ambient phenomena which renounces critical concerns in favor of a sensorial encounter characterized by ineffability, immersiveness, and “mute perception.”<sup>1</sup>

Kim-Cohen’s focus on ambience takes as its springboard the cultural historian Jonathan Sterne’s notion of the “audiovisual litany” — the attributes implicitly correlated with sound. In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003), Sterne enumerates the qualities culturally associated with the phenomena of sound in contradistinction to vision. Sound is immersive, affective, and temporal and places the listener “inside” an event. Sound involves physical contact (rather than distance), is concerned with interiors (rather than surfaces), and links to subjectivity (rather than objectivity).

## Cognizant Perception

Zeroing in on the year 2013, Kim-Cohen detects in the epicenter of New York a convergence of sound events taking place over summer allegedly united in their rejection of criticality and embrace of a type of ambience congruent with Sterne's audiovisual litany: *ambient* at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; *The String and the Mirror* at Lisa Cooley Gallery; the commencement of Susan Philipsz's sound installation *Day is Done* on Governor's Island; and *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*— the first major museum survey of sound art at MoMA.

Kim-Cohen's round dismissal of these events betrays, however, an attitude we could name (via the philosopher Tonino Griffero) "separistic sensualism." This presumes a detachment from criticality and cognition as if sensual modes of apprehension were reductively corporeal. In contrast to Kim-Cohen, Griffero advocates for a philosophy of atmosphere as a "mode[s] of a corporeal predualistic communication that at times is supersubjective and superobjective."<sup>2</sup> According to Griffero, to discern the atmospheric is to engage in modes of perception that are pre-categorical and synaesthetic. Extrapolating Griffero's definition of atmospheres as "in-between" states eliciting multi-dimensional responses, we could argue a parallel case for the importance of sonic ambience as offering a challenge to linguistic conventions and modes of signification.

If cognition denotes knowledge and understanding as well as the ability to feel or perceive, then sonic ambience might prompt a mode of reception both critical *and* affective; a mode I am terming "cognizant perception." Cognizant perception as an expanded condition of perception might then eschew the entrenched dualisms identified in Sterne's litany and inadvertently replicated in Kim-Cohen's epistemological reductions.

## Notes

- 1 Seth Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience and Other Essays*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 4.
- 2 Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 108–109.

## References

- Griffero, Tonino. *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*. Trans. Sarah de Sanctis. Surrey: Ashgate, 2014.
- Kim-Cohen, Seth. *Against Ambience and Other Essays*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Jonathan Sterne. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of the Reproduction of Sound*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.