I hesitate as I inch towards the entrance of the Blackwood Gallery. Our professor, Amish, volunteered to give any curious students a tour of Blackwood and the e-Gallery, situated in the CCIT building next door to the Kaneff Center. Amish stands inside the restrictive, single-room gallery space with the exhibition coordinator, Juliana. They make small talk as I force myself past the threshold of open space.

I scrape my fingernail against the ribbed strap of my shoulder bag. My leather boots make rubbery noises and my pants swish together with each stride. Uncertainty and new experiences generally shake me with trepidation. I have a feeling the installations for this exhibition, *Volume: Hear Here*, will not put my nerves at ease.

The wall, by the reception area, reads: Curated by Christof Migone. I pick up the catalogue. The sound-based works selected were installed and co-presented by Blackwood’s sister gallery, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, in downtown Toronto. I tuck the booklet into my bag. Time to get my hands dirty.

I look past Amish’s sideburns and see my friend, Melinda, crawl into Alexis O’Hara’s *SQUEEQUE! The Improbable Igloo*. The artist built the installation with recycled speakers from Montreal, reinforced to the shape of a dome. I too crawl inside where four other students sit on shaggy carpet samples.

A sound mixer rests in the middle with two microphones dangling from the Igloo’s ceiling. I tap the mic with my finger. Thudding noises echo and pulsate back and forth between the conjoined speakers. White noise settles into the momentary silence.

“We can speak into them, right?” I ask.
“I think that’s the point,” Melinda says. I take the mic on my side and speak. My words, “trippy shit,” have the same effect as the thudding. The feedback travels in waves around my head. Like a child, I play with all the knobs, switches and sliders on the sound mixer. “Trippy shit” sounds like trippy shit.

“Does anyone know how to beat box?” asks Alex, the redhead from class.

Everyone shakes their heads.

“We had this pothead friend that used to beat box for us when we were bored. He’d repeat ‘boots and cats and,’” I say. The girls laugh.

Alex starts beat boxing while her friend plays with the switches. The feedback sounds like a Theremin. I decide to crawl out and explore while I have the chance.

Against the wall adjacent to O’Hara’s igloo, a power-bar plugged into the wall lies dormant on the floor. I kneel down. I hear nothing. Devices clutter the outlets of the bar.

“Those are electronic pest control devices. They’re meant to keep rodents and pests away,” says Juliana.

I look up to see the brunette hovering over me. Amish had joined the others in the igloo.

“I don’t think I understand,” I say. How do those electronic devices keep rodents away? I was used to my father laying down traps and sheets of glue around the old subsidized house we lived in when we moved to Hamilton in the mid-90s. Our house was infested with mischievous mice.

“The devices emit a wavelength of sound that human ears can’t detect. Dave Dyment made this as an homage to Robert Barry. Dyment has another installation to your right,” she says.

On the wall just above the installation, the descriptor tag reads: ‘Nothing (for Robert Barry), 2007, Dave Dyment.’

Robert Barry, I later found out, sent out invitations for an exhibition at a gallery which he deliberately closed so invitees couldn’t visit.

Nothingness, I think to myself. We hear nothing when we see the pest devices. Like rodents, we scurry off without thinking a single thought about the so-called work of art. I came to the gallery to
experience “nothing.” Even nothing is something and here it is before me, much in the same way Barry’s exhibition was of nothing.

This is sound art? I’m not disappointed – in fact, I’m intrigued – but this is surprising. Juliana walks over to the headphones hanging off the wall. She turns on a switch and a high-pitched noise rings from the device. I walk over. Untitled (Headset) makes my ears hurt.

“Try it on,” says Juliana.

“What? Are you sure?” I ask. She dismounts the headphones from the wall and hands them over, nodding with reassurance.

As I stretch the earpieces over my head the screeching feedback disappears. I wait. No sound returns.

“A very existential piece. Dyment played around with the wiring and added a microphone on one ear. So, what you’re hearing is the sound emitting from the earphone, picked up by the microphone, looping infinitely. And now? You’ve worn it. You stopped the looping dead in its tracks. The question is, how do you understand infinity?”

Quite literally, my head got in the way of the infinite loop. It’s like my brain couldn’t handle the abstract notion of infinity. Feedbacks, space, looping, infinity, never-ending time, nothingness are all the ideas, tools and themes of what a sound exhibition may employ.

I had no idea what to expect with “sound art”. At the very least I’d have wagered some music or perhaps a rhythm or a beat, but this was an art gallery, not a studio or a concert; what I heard was not something that would simply please me, but something that would make me think. Marcel Duchamp would be very happy.

My fear of the new only turned into a state of confusion and questions – questions artists seem to address that most would probably not understand at first glance, or first listen. Listening means more than looking for sound. Listening means to think and to understand.