

# **EXTRA REAL AESTHETICS**

**SOUND, ART AND ENVIRONMENT**  
**GUEST EDITOR: GASCIA OUZOUMANI**  
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**SOUND ART AND ENVIRONMENT**

**VOLUME 6 NUMBER 1 (2017)**

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Gascia Ouzounian

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# SOUND ART AND ENVIRONMENT

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# **EDITORIAL**

Rethinking Acoustic Ecology:  
Sound Art and Environment

Gascia Ouzounian

In encountering various sound art works over the last decade, I've had the occasion to hear a rocky hillside sing; listen to what a companion described as the "*ür-tone* of civilization" emerge from beneath a traffic island in Times Square; spend hours inside a sparse room in Lower Manhattan bathed in magenta light and filled with a dense, synthesized drone that seemed to change with every slight movement of my head and body; hear geometries of sound — distinct lines and shapes — form inside a stairwell in the Technical University in Berlin; sit inside a "sound laboratory" outfitted with an acoustically transparent floor and several dozen loudspeakers while listening, perhaps improbably, to recordings of whale song; plug my headphones into the side of a building in order to hear sounds that were generated by the infrastructure of the building itself; ride the S-Bahn in West Berlin while listening to electromagnetic frequencies emitted by objects and architectures around me; and walk through Central Park while listening, through headphones, to Janet Cardiff recount a fantastical story that somehow seemed to correspond with random happenings in the park that day.<sup>1</sup>

These various encounters represent only a fraction of the myriad genres of sound art that have emerged since the late 1960s that foreground the relationship of sound to environment, site, and place. These genres include sound installation art, site-specific sound art, soundscape composition, sound walks and audio walks, sound maps, mobile and locative sound art, and works that are concerned with environmental processes. Together, these various genres encompass a striking range of approaches to

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conceptualizing, articulating, and reconfiguring place through sound. Some works, like Walter Fähndrich's *Music for a Quarry* (1999), wherein a marble quarry emits sine tones at the precise times of astronomical sunset and sunrise each day, give voice to a place.<sup>2</sup> Other works, perhaps most famously Max Neuhaus' sound installation *Times Square* (1977–1992, 2002–ongoing), reconfigure the soundscapes of public spaces.<sup>3</sup> Artists have conceived of acoustic environments as "living environments." La Monte Young describes *Dream House*, a sound-and-light installation that has existed in various forms in Lower Manhattan since the early 1960s, as a "living organism with a life and tradition of its own."<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the Austrian sound artist Bernhard Leitner conceives of sound in architectural terms and understands sound specifically as building material. Leitner has written of his work *TON-RAUM TU-BERLIN* (1984), installed in a stairwell in Berlin's Technical University, that "the cubic, static metal architecture [of the stairwell], in whose walls and ceilings 24 broadband and 18 high-frequency loudspeakers are installed, is the supporting structure for dynamic, sound-plasmic spaces. ... Sound is ... sculptural material. Sound is the construction material for space."<sup>5</sup>

Numerous sound works make audible architectures and environments that are normally inaudible. Mark Bain and Arno Brandlhuber's *BUG* (2009) enables people to "listen to a building" through the use of seismic sensors embedded into the building's infrastructure. For Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* series (since 2004), listeners are given headphones that have built-in coils that respond to electromagnetic waves, thus enabling listeners to hear frequencies that reside beyond the normal range of human hearing.<sup>6</sup> As such, *BUG* and *Electrical Walks* entail an "audification" process; they transduce inaudible acoustic energy into audible sound. Similarly, numerous sound works, including a dozen or so projects described in "Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words" (eds. Bianchi and Manzo, 2016), entail a process that is known as "sonification" and translate non-acoustical information into sound.<sup>7</sup> Andrea Polli's *Heat and the Heartbeat of the City: Central Park Climate Change in Sound* (2004), for example, sonifies data related to climate change.<sup>8</sup>

Countless sound works entail walking. Sound walks, listening walks, audio walks, and, more recently, mobile and geo-locative audio walks invite people to navigate an environment while listening to real or composed sounds. In locative audio walks, audio recordings are typically triggered according to a listener's position in GPS space. A listener can therefore create

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his or her own “mix” of these works by navigating a site in a particular way. Other audio walks use fixed audio recordings that are heard (for example) using CD or MP3 players. In Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *Her Long Black Hair* (2004), a listener is given a CD player and headphones and navigates Manhattan’s Central Park by following Cardiff’s footsteps, the sounds of which are audible on the recording.<sup>9</sup>

Some environmental sound works invite people simply to listen to the sound of a place, using minimal intervention. For Akio Suzuki’s *oto-date* series (since 1996), pictograms of footprints that resemble ears are painted onto the ground (or other surfaces) in various locations, signaling that a person should stand in a certain place and listen. After some time, these pictograms simply fade away.

Certainly there are many other works and artistic approaches that could be added to this preliminary list. What emerges from this multitude of activity is that over the last fifty years sound artists have undeniably turned their attention— and ours— to place and environment as rich sources of artistic inspiration and acoustic fascination. For this special issue of *Evental Aesthetics* then, a journal that invites philosophical and critical perspectives on art and aesthetic experience, we might ask how environmental sound art in its myriad and evolving forms can bring new insights to philosophical discourses and how philosophies of place and environment might influence how we make and think about sound art. Or, as I propose to do in this brief introduction, we might consider the ways in which sound art works themselves embody and enact philosophies of place and what can we learn by attending to these philosophies wrought at the intersection of site and sound.

## Rethinking Acoustic Ecology

A common area of convergence between philosophical inquiry, sound art, and sound studies is in the realm of acoustic ecology, a term that is most often used to designate an environmentalist approach to acoustic environments.<sup>10</sup> On the most basic level, acoustic ecology invites us to pay attention to the sounds of a place. The very act of “listening to place” was

once regarded as transgressive in relation to ocularcentric cultures that have historically privileged visual understandings of place. Today however this idea has been complicated by what some theorists view as overreliance on an outdated term, “soundscape.” For Tim Ingold (2007), the idea of soundscape suggests an “emplacement” in listening—a fixity in place that is antithetical to sound.<sup>11</sup> In his widely cited essay “Against Soundscape,” Ingold pointedly identifies a “place confinement” in soundscape studies, a kind of positioning that he views as “a form of deafness.” He argues that sound “flows … along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by … movement *around* rather than a fixed location *within*.” Therefore, in order to listen or (in Ingold’s conception) to “follow sound,” one must “wander the same paths [that sound follows]. Attentive listening, as opposed to passive hearing, surely entails the very opposite of emplacement.”<sup>12</sup> It must be said that Ingold’s particular critique, while useful in recuperating a sensorially integrated approach to the experience of sound, does not take into account the various “mobile” modes of listening that many soundscape artists and researchers engage. The composers Hildegard Westerkamp and Luc Ferrari for example respectively use the terms “moving ear” and “wandering ear” in describing their particular approaches to recording environmental sounds and creating soundscape compositions.

Acoustic ecologists who have followed in the footsteps of R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project are typically concerned with understanding how acoustic environments are affected by environmental change, including, most commonly, increasing noise pollution. Some acoustic ecologists aim to preserve or conserve acoustic environments and might intervene in an environment in order to maintain or increase the “health” of its soundscape. Markers of healthy soundscapes, according to key studies in acoustic ecology, include the density and diversity of “biophonic” and “geophonic” sounds, which respectively refer to sounds produced by biological organisms and geological processes; the ability to hear distant sounds; and what Schafer famously characterized as a “hi-fi” soundscape, referring to an acoustic environment that boasts “a favorable signal-to-noise ratio.”<sup>13</sup>

Attending to environmental health is certainly laudable, and indeed it is a pressing concern in the context of a global environmental crisis. Still, what is often lacking in conventional approaches to acoustic ecology is a recognition of the complex socio-cultural factors that contribute to shared

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understandings of “sound” and “noise.” Put simply, many studies in acoustic ecology fail to recognize that diverse social and cultural groups—or even different individuals—experience sound and noise very differently. Further, the very idea of “noise pollution,” which has historically propelled acoustic ecology and likewise underpinned efforts in noise legislation, presumes that certain sounds—or even certain sound levels (as measured in decibels)—are acceptable while others are not and suggests a single, dominant model for distinguishing desired sounds from unwanted noise. What often follows from this is a binary division whereby “natural” sounds are considered desirable while “man-made” are deemed noisy. Acoustic ecology has therefore justifiably been criticized for subscribing to a now-dated Man-versus-Nature binary whereby nature and culture are framed in oppositional terms.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Sterne has identified a specifically “antimodernist” thread in Schafer’s philosophy of soundscape, writing that “[f]or Schafer ... soundscape is meant to invoke nature, and the limits and outsides of industrial society. Even as it reaches into the modern world to describe its ambience, Schafer’s *soundscape* carries with it a fairly strict—if sophisticated—antimodernist politics.”<sup>15</sup> Others have traced anti-urban leanings within Schafer’s conception of acoustic ecology.

While my account here is necessarily an oversimplification of this debate, it is clear that blunt divisions between “sound” and “noise” cannot account for the variety of sounds that characterize modern life. Nor are such divisions necessarily helpful in appreciating the wider ecological and socio-cultural systems within which sounds operate. For example, in determining what constitutes a “vibrant” urban environment—one that would evidently include people, whose absence would conversely indicate urban decline—a healthy urban soundscape would necessarily include *the sounds that people make*, including those sounds that are ubiquitous in cities but that are almost always deemed undesirable—like the sounds of traffic. This is not to say that the sounds of traffic should be celebrated but rather that traffic sounds *in and of themselves* do not possess positive or negative attributes; they are only meaningful in relation to the particular environmental, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they are heard.

In parallel to the work of acoustic ecologists working in the realm of applied acoustics, soundscape artists and researchers have developed alternative approaches to acoustic ecology that trouble easy distinctions between sound and noise. In her project *The Welsh Streets* (2012), the British

artist and scholar Jacqueline Waldock discovered that residents of the Welsh Streets, a low-income housing community in Liverpool that came under a compulsory purchase order as a result of an urban renewal scheme, drew comfort from the “noisiness” of their neighborhood and the ability to hear through the walls of their own homes the sounds that their neighbors made.<sup>16</sup> Nina, a resident of the Welsh Streets housing community who partnered with Waldock and other residents on the project, lamented the decline of neighborhood noise, observing that “I miss people calling their cats in, or shouting at each other or just talking to each other.”<sup>17</sup> Nina’s perspective, which was echoed by many other residents of the Welsh Streets, contrasted sharply with normative ideas about sound and noise. Waldock writes, “Nina’s comments … challenge the [city] council’s assumptions about desirable homes as well as challenging an established aesthetically moralistic norm that the sound coming from neighbours is negative.”<sup>18</sup> The *Welsh Streets* project speaks to the ways in which social and economic factors — in this case, complex intersections of class and power — contribute to understandings of sound and noise and the perceived desirability or undesirability of certain sounds and soundscapes. It is notable that in Waldock’s study, members of a disenfranchised group reported an altogether different politics of noise than the one that is typically promoted by city officials, revealing how a politics of noise can be used to empower or disempower communities. Waldock’s work further shows how studies of acoustic environments can productively extend to domestic and private spheres, spaces that have historically been underrepresented in soundscape studies.<sup>19</sup>

## Instruments to be Played by the Movement of the Earth

In Schafer’s conception of acoustic ecology, the acoustic environment is seen as an entity that is ruined by human activity and that requires human intervention to “fix.” Other artists have pointed towards alternative models of environment whereby environments themselves are seen as possessing agency and voice. An example is Terry Fox’s *Instruments to be Played by the Movement of the Earth* (1987). For this work, Fox installed a number of objects inside a gallery such that these objects could be acoustically “activated” by

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the movements of the earth. In an announcement for the exhibition, Fox wrote:

There is no “fixed” installation. Rather, the gradual accumulation of instruments that will sound by vibrations of the earth. These instruments are to be played only in this way. No sound in the absence of vibration. Potential sound. The sounds created by the instruments will correspond to the sounds heard during an earthquake; objects falling, rolling across the floor, rumbling, glasses and plates breaking, glasses shattering, an alarm going off, etc.<sup>20</sup>

For this installation, then, Fox did not collect or exhibit environmental sounds but instead established conditions whereby the earth itself could generate acoustic activity. According to a reviewer who was present at the exhibit, Fox’s own preference “was for the instruments to remain silent … his interest [was] in investigating the tension caused by the expectation and imagination … as much as in investigating the potential for possible sound.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Fox, the primary focus of the installation was not the sounds that were produced or experienced therein but instead the sensitization to the heightened perception inherent in attentive listening: an attunement not to “sounds of the environment” but to listening itself as a way of being in the world. We can find resonances with this idea in “Imagined Drone Ecologies,” Owen Coggins’ contribution to this issue of *Evental Aesthetics* — a performative essay on listening that enacts the tensions and relationships between drone music and environmental sound.

## Sonic Facts and Fictions

In acoustic ecology, field recordings (recordings of soundscape) are almost inevitably treated as evidentiary documents, as containers of acoustic “facts”: accurate or near-accurate representations of an acoustic environment at a given moment in time. The presence of the sound recordist is thereby typically diminished or effectively erased in these recordings, a topic that Mark Peter Wright deftly unpacks in this issue by introducing the figure of the “noisy non-self” and thus recuperating those identities that have been long submerged, erased, or ignored within soundscape recordings. The use of spectrograms, “soundtopes,” and other computational tools for

quantifying, measuring, visualizing, and analyzing data pertaining to soundscape recordings has further helped to establish a scientific basis for acoustic ecology.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, soundscape artists are typically understood as producing sonic “fictions” by creatively altering, processing, editing, mixing, and re-situating environmental sounds in the form of compositions, performances, installations, and myriad artistic interventions. What is lost in this duality between acoustic fact and fiction — between the dual poles that have been erected between soundscape science and soundscape art — is that they obscure a more fundamental fact: that *all* recordings of soundscape are partial and subjective documents, subject not only to the many choices made by the sound recordist and the affordances of the particular technologies that are used to measure, record, store, transmit, and reproduce sound but equally to a politics of listening that (consciously or unconsciously) informs various “hearings” of place.

The dualism between art and science in acoustic ecology also masks the idea that soundscape artworks can sometimes reveal profound truths about acoustic environments, realities that cannot be easily measured or quantified. For his 2003 album *Weather Report* for example, the sound recordist Chris Watson created three eighteen-minute tracks that were each derived from hours- or days-long recordings of various environments in Kenya, Scotland, and the Norwegian Sea.<sup>23</sup> Although these compositions do not pretend to act as documentaries and are clearly time-compressed and highly edited, they nevertheless offer numerous insights into the acoustic environments they represent as well as qualitative information about these environments that would be impossible to glean from spectrographs or other quantitative tools for measuring sound. For this issue of *Evental Aesthetics*, David C. Jackson considers discourses in acoustic ecology in relation to philosophies of the Anthropocene and identifies a “dark acoustic ecology” in the work of soundscape artists whose compositions reveal aspects of environmental change and degradation. Jackson analyzes the track “Vatnajökull” from Watson’s *Weather Report*, showing how a dark acoustic ecology — one that “listens in on the sonic conditions and effects of accelerated climate change” — operates therein.

## Free/Phase

In proposing the idea of acoustic design — a project that he conceived as an aural analogue to the industrial design project of the Bauhaus movement — R. Murray Schafer suggested that the aim of acoustic design would be to *improve* the world's soundscapes: to give “form and beauty” to acoustic environments that were otherwise chaotic, harmful, and in some cases facing the threat of extinction.<sup>24</sup> As an aesthetic project concerned with beautifying acoustic environments, however, acoustic design can sometimes miss the mark. Forty years after the publication of Schafer’s landmark text *The Tuning of the World*, there are numerous examples of sound installations in public spaces that are intended to beautify or improve acoustic environments but that are so incongruous with the particular environments they inhabit (recordings of ocean surf or birdsong played at park benches in Berlin) or so misguided in their aims (recordings of classical music deployed in urban centers in order to discourage “anti-social behavior”) that it is questionable whether anything resembling the aesthetic revolution Schafer imagined — or even anything of artistic merit — has actually been achieved.<sup>25</sup>

Far more compelling than these ill-advised attempts to “improve” soundscapes (to my mind) are those public sound art projects that are deeply informed by the histories, cultures, and politics that shape an environment and that invite people to newly experience and appreciate these dimensions of place. For Mendi+Keith Obadike’s *Free/Phase: An Intermedia Suite in Three Nodes* (2014–15), a project that commemorated the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War, the artists collected one hundred and fifty African American freedom songs — spirituals and protest songs rooted in the struggle for emancipation from slavery and subsequent civil rights movements in the United States — from the archives of the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR) at Columbia College, Chicago. From this collection of freedom songs, the Obadikes created a three-part project that comprised a public sound art installation, “Beacon”; a video-and-multichannel-audio work titled “Overcome”; and “Dialogue with DJs,” a community engagement project wherein the public was invited to take part in private listening sessions and discussions of freedom songs with prominent DJs in Chicago.<sup>26</sup>

For the original installation of “Beacon,” the Obadikes installed a large parabolic loudspeaker on the rooftop of the Chicago Cultural Center. This loudspeaker projected melodies from spirituals and freedom songs at 9 a.m., 12 p.m., and 7 p.m. on each day of the exhibition. According to the Obadikes, each spiritual that was chosen for “Beacon” “contains musical & lyrical messages that could have been used for pre-emancipation navigation on the underground railroad or inspiration.”<sup>27</sup>

By making audible and indeed “beaming” into public space melodies from spirituals and freedom songs that emerged out of the experience of slavery, subjugation, and persistent social injustice, the Obadikes recover histories that are normally obscured, ignored, or denied within the public sphere. Further, they directly “call” people to come into contact with and contend with these histories. From video documentation of “Beacon,” it is evident that the Obadikes chose to present freedom songs in strikingly resonant and ringing yet unadorned and unembellished ways, such that the melodies might be easily identified and clearly heard.<sup>28</sup> In their arrangement of the song “Woke up this Morning with my Mind Set on Freedom” for example, the Obadikes used original recordings they created of various bell sounds, which they blended with overtones from guitar harmonics. In their installation, each note of “Woke up this Morning” clearly rings out into the public square facing the Chicago Cultural Center, a building that itself pays homage to the American Civil War.<sup>29</sup> As such, “Beacon” recalls the church bell, a recurring figure in sound studies and one that Schafer discusses at some length in *The Tuning of the World*.<sup>30</sup> However, “Beacon” profoundly transforms the function of the church bell. By ringing out freedom songs into public space, “Beacon” invites people to connect historical struggles for racial equality with contemporary ones and simultaneously to imagine a different future. The Obadikes write that their work on archives in general “reflects on the information that sometimes vanishes from view, whether because it is ephemeral or because it has been buried. We hope our sounding the archives invites new ways of listening to the past and the future at the same time.”<sup>31</sup>

*Free/Phase* also stands out among public sound art works in terms of how it imagines, enacts, and enables community. In soundscape studies, the term “acoustic community,” introduced by Schafer in *Tuning of the World*, is typically used to describe a group of people who share a social bond as well as a common “acoustic space” (Schafer defines “acoustic space” as a physical

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space that delimits audibility).<sup>32</sup> In Schafer's words, "[t]he house can be appreciated as an acoustic phenomenon, designed for the first community, the family. Within it they may produce private sounds of no interest outside its walls."<sup>33</sup> After the family home, the second acoustic community described by Schafer is the church. He writes, "A parish was also acoustic, and it was defined by the range of the church bells. When you could no longer hear the church bells, you had left the parish."<sup>34</sup> This idea of acoustic community as defined by the physical limits of audibility has persisted within soundscape studies and sound studies. In the book *Spaces Speak, Are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (2006), Barry Blessing and Linda Ruth Salter develop a similar model of acoustic community, using the term "acoustic horizon" in a way that recalls Schafer's idea of "acoustic space." They write:

The concept of virtual sonic boundaries leads to a new abstraction, *acoustic horizon*, the maximum distance between a listener and a source of sound where the sonic event can still be heard. ... The acoustic horizon is ... the experiential boundary that delineates which sonic events are included and which are excluded. The acoustic horizon also delineates an acoustic arena, a region where listeners are part of a community that shares an ability to hear a sonic event.<sup>35</sup>

In *Spaces Speak*, "acoustic community" is once again conceptualized as a sociality that is bound by the physiological and physical limits of hearing. By contrast, in *Free/Phase* acoustic community encompasses a complex sociality anchored within social identities, shared histories, collective memories, lived experiences as well as a common purpose. Listeners who are part of this community are not necessarily those who can *literally* hear the sounds of the installation but rather those who appreciate the deeper meanings encoded in freedom songs and spirituals. Following on the work of Cheryl Boots (2014), this community is an "ethical community" as well as an acoustic one; it is bound by ethics and shared ideals and not only by the physics of sound and the physiology of hearing. In her thesis *Creating Community in the American Civil Rights Movement: Singing Spirituals and Freedom Songs* (2014), Boots suggests that the singing of freedom songs produced an "egalitarian resonance" for African American activists, a "shared experience of singing or listening to music together that creates a mutual respect and appreciation."<sup>36</sup> Boots examines the distinctive power of freedom songs, writing:

[I]n the mid-twentieth century crucible of nonviolent protest, some “sorrow songs” were transformed into “freedom songs” — affirmations of identity, autonomy, and justice in the mouths, throats, and hearts of a new generation leading its elders. Built on the layered meanings and tunes of the spirituals, newly adapted and spontaneously created freedom songs established a common bond among singers. In a “war” where nonviolence was the strategic imperative of the Civil Rights Movement leaders and trained followers, spirituals and freedom songs were non-violent “weapons.” They affirmed the identity of African Americans, offered hope to the persecuted, and enacted the communal ideal of a peaceful society where all people would be mutual participants regardless of race. That ethical community — a “common ground” as Howard Thurman saw it, or “the beloved community” as Martin Luther King, Jr., envisioned — continues to be a work in progress, a goal not yet fully achieved in twenty-first century America.<sup>37</sup>

In *Tuning of the World*, Schafer describes a soundscape study he carried out at a French fishing village, Lesconil. The village was surrounded by sea on three sides, and the daily rhythms of its inhabitants were governed by the various sounds that would arrive by sea or by land at different times of the day, subject to wind, temperature, and other conditions that affect the propagation of sound. The sounds that governed daily life in Lesconil, according to Schafer’s study, included the village’s church bells, farming noises, the sound of puffer buoys at sea, the motors of trawlers, foghorns, and the church bells of various nearby villages. In recounting this study, Schafer suggested that “a consideration of the acoustic community might also include an investigation of how vital information from outside the community reaches the ears of the inhabitants and affects their daily routine.”<sup>38</sup> In Schafer’s conception then, the daily lives of an acoustic community are governed by specific aural cues or what Schafer calls “sound signals.” By contrast, in *Free/Phase* “sound signals” operate in altogether different ways. The “vital information” contained in freedom songs and spirituals was vital both in a literal sense, providing information to people who risked their lives to gain freedom, and in a spiritual sense, acting as a lifeline for survivors, activists, and black communities. Further, the “sound signals” in “Beacon” do not function by signaling *tasks*; rather, they generate community through signaling a shared sense of history and equally a shared sense of purpose among listeners.

Nandi Marumo’s review of the *Free/Phase* project, published on the CBMR website, reflects on the relationship between the individual and the collective within this acoustic community. Marumo reviewed *Free/Phase* when it was re-exhibited from June 4–18, 2016, at the Rebuild Foundation’s Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago. She writes:

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As I was arriving [at the “Beacon” installation] around noon, I could hear pieces of the song “Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Set on Freedom.” I had heard the song before, but what I found so moving and wondrous was the way that it seemed to transform the space around the Stony Island Arts Bank. The neighborhood around the Arts Bank is “underinvested” and underserved, with many unused buildings and empty dirt lots where something used to be, like so many black communities across the country. Hearing that freedom song carried through the wind all around the block changed the feeling of the space from one of a certain kind of defeat to one of pulsing determination, from questions about how we get free under all this weight to an assuredness in our capacities to build ourselves and each other up, an urgency that still takes enough time to tend to our hopes and dreams. It reminded me not only of the importance of music as a way to frame our struggle for freedom, but also as a way to pay attention to the smaller, more intimate parts of our lives that inform and shape our movements for liberation.<sup>39</sup>

Marumo’s response to *Free/Phase* speaks to the ability of sound to utterly transform an environment—in this case, transforming an “underinvested” neighborhood characterized by “unused buildings and empty dirt lots” into a place of resolve and hope; of “pulsing determination.” This transformation does not take place merely on the surface level of “beautifying” a soundscape; rather, it entails a kind of profound transformation that occurs on the level of history, memory, and society and how individuals and communities are shaped in relation to these.

When considered through the lens of works like *Free/Phase*, the questions that have underpinned so many studies in the realm of soundscape and acoustic ecology are fundamentally reconfigured. A recurring theme in acoustic ecology is the imperative to become “attuned” to our acoustic environments: to notice and observe the sounds around us. But we must also ask—is listening in itself enough? Or is listening only meaningful if it goes beyond the surface level of “hearing” and “sensing sound” to reach other dimensions of acoustic experience? How are histories of inclusion and exclusion inscribed within the soundscapes of public spaces? What would it mean to become “attuned” to these dimensions of soundscape? What would a socially aware listening or an activist listening entail? How are acoustic communities formed along socio-cultural and political lines, and how can the terms of acoustic ecology expand to include these dimensions of community? What would an ethics of soundscape entail, and how would our conception of listening change if listening was understood in relation to an ethics and politics of soundscape?

## Notes

- 1 In this paragraph, I refer to the following works: *Music for a Quarry* (1999) by Walter Fähndrich; *Times Square* (1977–1992 and 2002–) by Max Neuhaus; *Dream House: Sound and Light Environment* (1993–) by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela; TON-RAUM TU-BERLIN (1984–) by Bernhard Leitner; a concert of soundscape compositions by Chris Watson at the Sonic Lab, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Belfast; BUG (2008–) by Mark Bain and Arno Brandhluber; *Electrical Walks* (2005–) by Christina Kubisch; *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) by Janet Cardiff.
- 2 Walter Fähndrich, “Music for a Quarry,” Walter Fähndrich website, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.musicforspaces.ch/en/C2.html>.
- 3 “Max Neuhaus, Times Square,” Dia Foundation website, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://diaart.org/visit/visit/max-neuhaus-times-square>.
- 4 La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, “Dream House: Sound and Light Environment,” MELA Foundation website, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.melafoundation.org/dream02.htm>.
- 5 Bernhard Leitner, “TON-RAUM TU BERLIN,” Bernhard Leitner website, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.bernhardleitner.com/works/>.
- 6 Christina Kubisch, “Electrical Walks,” Christina Kubisch website, Accessed March 21, 2017, [http://www.christinakubisch.de/en/works/electrical\\_walks](http://www.christinakubisch.de/en/works/electrical_walks).
- 7 Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo, eds., *Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 8 For this work Andrea Polli uses an atmospheric model of New York City developed by climate researchers. Polli writes, “The model allows [the researchers] to predict how climate change will affect New York and the surrounding suburbs. I created a series of sonifications attempting to convey the physical experience of the increasing temperatures . . . As you listen to the compositions, you will travel forward in time at an accelerated pace and experience an intensification of heat in sound.” See Andrea Polli, “Sonifications of Global Environmental Data,” in *Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words*, ed. Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3–8.
- 9 Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, “Her Long Black Hair,” Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller website, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/longhair.html>.
- 10 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed., (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994).
- 11 Tim Ingold, “Against Soundscape,” in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. Angus Carlyle (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007), 10–13.
- 12 Ibid., 12–13.
- 13 See for example Bryan C. Pijanowski et al., “Soundscape Ecology: the Science of Sound in the Landscape,” *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203–216. In Schafer’s terminology, a “hi-fi” soundscape is one in which sounds may be heard clearly. By contrast, a “lo-fi” soundscape is characterized by an “unfavorable signal-to-noise ratio. Applied to soundscape studies a

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lo-fi environment is one in which signals are overcrowded, resulting in masking or lack of clarity" (Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 272).

- 14 See A.Y. Kelman, "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies," *Sense and Society* 5, no. 2 (2010): 212–234.
- 15 Jonathan Sterne, "Soundscape, Landscape, Escape," in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 183.
- 16 Jacqueline Waldock, "Hearing Urban Regeneration: Community Composition as a Tool for Capturing Change," in *The Auditory Culture Reader, 2nd Edition*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 151–162.
- 17 Ibid., 160.
- 18 Ibid., 160–161.
- 19 Jacqueline Waldock, "Soundmapping: Critiques and Reflections on this New Publicly Engaging Medium," *Journal of Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://journal.sonicstudies.org/volo1/nro1/a08>.
- 20 Terry Fox, "Artist Statement. Terry Fox, Instruments to be Played by the Earth," Capp Street Project Archive, Accessed March 21, 2017, [https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/prop\\_r87eo01.pdf](https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/prop_r87eo01.pdf).
- 21 "Announcement. Terry Fox, Instruments to be Played by the Earth," Capp Street Project Archive, Accessed March 21, 2017, [https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/anc\\_r87eo01.pdf](https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/anc_r87eo01.pdf).
- 22 See Bryan C. Pijanowski et al., "Soundscape Ecology: the Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203–216.
- 23 Chris Watson, *Weather Report*, Touch Music TO:47, CD, 2003.
- 24 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 5.
- 25 See Fritz Schlueter, "A Soundscape Remodelled," Sonic Agents (blog), January 4, 2013, Accessed March 21, 2017, <https://sonicagents.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/a-soundscape-re-modeled/>. See also Theo Kindynis, "Weaponising Classical Music: Waging class warfare beneath our cities' streets," *Ceasefire* (magazine), September 29, 2012, Accessed March 21, 2017, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/weaponising-classical-music-class-warfare-waged-beneath-cities-streets/>.
- 26 Following the exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2015, *Free/Phase* was re-exhibited in June 2016 at Rebuild Foundation's Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago.
- 27 Mendi+Keith Obadike, "SO! Amplifies: Mendi+Keith Obadike and Sounding Race in America," Sounding Out! (blog), October 6, 2014, Accessed March 21, 2017, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/10/06/so-amplifies-mendikeith-obadike-and-sounding-race-in-america/>.
- 28 Mendi Obadike and Keith Obadike, "Free/Phase: Node 1 Beacon," YouTube video, 2:28, July 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JF4EGh-5uQ>.
- 29 "The People's Palace: The Story of the Chicago Cultural Centre," City of Chicago, Accessed March 21, 2017, [https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp\\_info/the\\_people\\_s\\_palacehistoryofthechicagoculturalcenterpage2.html](https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/the_people_s_palacehistoryofthechicagoculturalcenterpage2.html).
- 30 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 173–177.
- 31 "SO! Amplifies: Mendi+Keith Obadike and Sounding Race in America," Sounding Out! (blog), Accessed March 21, 2017, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/10/06/so-amplifies-mendikeith-obadike-and-sounding-race-in-america/>.

- 32 In Schafer's conception, "The acoustic space of a sounding object is that volume of space in which sound can be heard" (*The Soundscape*, 214).
- 33 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 215.
- 34 Ibid., 215.
- 35 Barry Blessing and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 22.
- 36 Cheryl Boots, "Creating community in the American Civil Rights Movement: Singing spirituals and freedom songs" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2014), 20.
- 37 Ibid., 10–11.
- 38 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 215.
- 39 Nandi Marumo, "Review of Free/Phase Exhibit at Stony Island Arts Bank," Center for Black Music Research (blog), June 14, 2016, Accessed March 21, 2017, <http://blogs.colum.edu/cbmr/2016/06/14/free-phase-at-rebuild/>.

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# THE NOISY-NONSELF: TOWARDS A MONSTROUS PRACTICE OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN LISTENING

Mark Peter Wright

## ABSTRACT

Environmental sound arts are based on a long-term engagement with nonhuman subjects through disciplines such as bioacoustics, acoustic ecology, field recording, and soundscape studies. Recording and representing the sounds of animals and environmental phenomena have been essential to such practices and their archival and arts-based impact. Throughout these more-than-human histories, however, there has been a relative lack of attention given to the presence of recordists themselves.

This article endeavors to re-hear the fringe identity of the environmental field recordist and analyze the promises and threats of self-erasure. I propose a new concept, the Noisy-Nonself, as a way of understanding such an identity. It is a chimeric figuration that seeks to collapse human, animal, and technological binaries, prompt ethical critique, and ask, “what are the consequences of hearing our own monsters?”

## KEYWORDS

Capture  
Monsters  
More-than-human  
Noisy-Nonself  
Self-silence



## Self-Silence Within Environmental Nature Recording

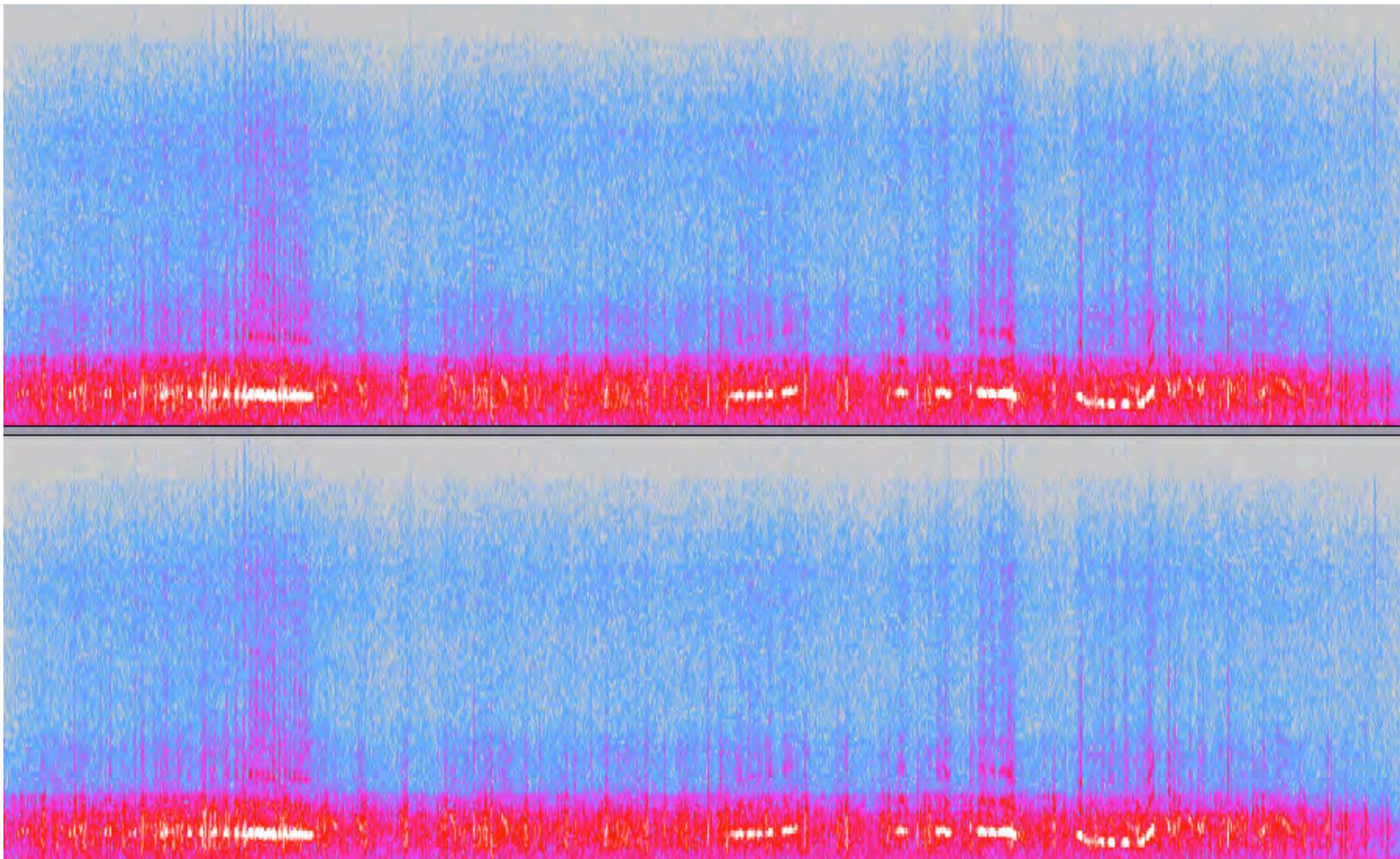
It begins with the first known recording of birdsong committed to wax cylinder in 1889.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the calls of an Indian Common Shama bird and the scratched media into which it was recorded, Ludwig Koch, the recordist, aged eight at the time, remains silent throughout. Inaudibly present within the crackling song, Koch, who would later gain renown as a naturalist, is also captured somewhere and inscribed into the wax. It may be the first media carrier of birdsong, but as this article will propose, it is also the inaugural rendering of a wildlife recordist. It sets a precedent for the next century, wherein environmental sound recordists will not be heard within the capture and mediation of nonhuman subjects and phenomena.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the Second World War, Koch was a household name in the UK. His “Sound Pictures,” which combined wildlife recordings, texts, and imagery, were distributed nationally through publications in addition to a weekly BBC Radio broadcast throughout the 1940’s. These recordings shifted ethnomusicology’s focus on man-made music and instead placed nature,

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particularly birdsong, firmly at the fore.<sup>3</sup> Koch's work tapped into the enthusiastic vein of natural historians, wildlife experts, and hobbyists (see Jeffery Boswell; Albert M. Brand; Jean Claude-Roche) across the UK, Europe, and North America. Institutes including the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (USA) and The Smithsonian Institute (USA) played major roles in facilitating, disseminating, and developing the technology for recording outdoor environments.<sup>4</sup>

Recording and archiving environmental sounds enabled the medium itself to be considered a viable social and cultural artifact, something that soundscape studies and the World Soundscape Project would later harness in the context of acoustic ecology.<sup>5</sup> These bioacoustic archival bloodlines silenced their own authors in order to privilege objective "facts." The legacies that arrive from such preservation-based contexts prioritize non-intrusive or hi-fidelity recordings of an environment or species.



**Figure 1.** Spectrogram screenshot of Ludwig Koch's Indian Common Shama recording, 1889. The white trails show birdsong amongst the reddish pink of low-level mechanical noise. But where is Ludwig Koch? Image by the author.

Recordists are perpetually engaged in the negotiation of their own “silence.”<sup>6</sup> The recording “I” is all too often associated with lo-fi acoustic detritus such as microphone handling, wind, and interference noise: aspects that must be silenced in order to maintain an “acceptable” signal-to-noise ratio. Today, whether for science or art, the prospect of self-dissolution haunts every moment the “Record” button is pressed.

## The Noisy Non-Self

The promise of self-erasure is an empathic, noninvasive tactic tied to claims of conservationism and art-philosophical motives of moving beyond the human and into other energies and agencies. This article does not wish to claim that recordists have no subjective intentionality within their own histories of self-erasure. On the contrary, I am endeavoring to critically and imaginatively reengage these inaudible histories so that we might begin to rehear a sense of performative self-presence. What I want to do next is jettison out from this historical departure point. I will tread quietly towards the monstrous potential of a practice-based chimera I am calling the "Noisy-Nonself."

### I, The Thing In The Margins

What potentials and pitfalls might be heard then if we begin to imaginatively bend the ear backwards towards the hiss of itself? What latticed identity might lurk in the margins of audial representation, and what speculative skins may emerge within the feedback loop of listening?

I began to materialize my own field recording self-other through a project called *I, the Thing in the Margins* (IMT Gallery, 2015). Two aspects initially motivated the work. The first was an attempt to draw attention towards the material and immaterial agents involved within human and nonhuman field encounters. In doing so I wanted to flesh out the embroiled relational ecologies of subjectivity and power. Second, rather than framing identify as a singular essential form, I sought to explore my own body as a site of multiple transgressions. I wanted to fuse the historically translucent skins of nature recordists and graft human, nonhuman, and technological registers, something that would speak towards an ethics of selfhood within such underrepresented histories. I wanted to do all of this with a healthy dose of irony and humor: to view the monstrous potentiality in myself and

the practice of environmental sound recording as something inevitably knotted by ongoing relations of power, agency, and technological becoming.

I initiated a persona that would represent a troubling doubling of the archetypal nature recordist: a crypto-character, part shadow, part absurd doppelgänger, a bipedal assemblage of another I. I moved towards my own spectral and material skins that grafted technology and the body as well as the animal. “Naturally” a fluffy onesie that resembled a microphone windshield was developed (!). Windshields or windjammers are used primarily to suppress breathing sounds and wind noise: they are the mediators of self-silence. Made commercially from synthetic fur but often adapted by DIY enthusiasts from real animal furs such as wolverines, the material encases the microphone within its meshed cage. They are commonly referred to as “fluffys” or “dead cats.” Smaller windjammers are known as “dead kittens.” The windshield continually cancels mediating bodies; technical, human, environmental apparatus, and subjects are softened into an absorbent milieu. It renders recordists as soundless agents: mute performers matted within the flesh and fur of their own body-apparatus.

The identity I began to develop aimed to dredge the hybridized relations that make up the field encounter. It was an imaginative attempt to recast the obfuscating self-body within a media history of silence and silencing and propel “the field” into a more plural space of relational possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

## The Horror Of Listening Back

On October 20, 1967, Roger Patterson filmed a sixty-second strip of sixteen-millimeter film near Bluff Creek, Colorado. The film captured the mythical presence of Bigfoot, a bipedal apelike humanimal: the Holy Grail connecting our present selves with our former other. Part natural history, part mythic hoax, this non-identity revealed itself in frame 352.<sup>8</sup> It is a moment of

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uncanny self-revelation that has since continued to reverberate beyond the film's edges and into the collective consciousness of enthusiasts, filmmakers, and historians alike.

Frame 352 fascinated and frightened me as a child. This familiar yet monstrous presence returning my gaze was a horrifying experience.

Drawing upon Anne Radcliffe's (1862) differentiation of terror from horror, media activist Marcel O'Gorman suggests that terror is the dreadful, ongoing anticipation of something not quite there. Horror on the other hand is a moment of fixity, a frozen state that "exceeds death; it represents not only the cessation of life but also a challenge to the human form itself."<sup>9</sup> Given this reading, environmental sound recordings may well be deemed frozen moments of horror, the practice and pursuit of sound itself more an act of ongoing process-based terror.

I decided to reenact frame 352 as a microphonic monster. I wanted to speculatively propose that Bigfoot's elusive non-presence mirrored the marginalized identity of the environmental sound recordist. Furthermore, if frame 352 were a suspended moment of horror that destabilized what it means to be human, recapturing myself would enact a similar feedback loop of uncanny revelation and disruption.

As part of the exhibition, which also included microphonic insects and camouflaged sound installations, a still image was produced (Figure 2) along with a companion film, which deconstructed the process of its reenactment. The film in particular revealed the performance and construct involved in any type of environmental capture. It shows my collaborator Helena Hunter zipping me into the fluffy costume before positioning my unsighted and ungainly body as it attempted to adopt the iconic Bigfoot pose.



**Figure 2.** "I, the Thing in the Margins," Deluxe C-type print. Image by the author.

## The Noisy-Nonself

Reflecting on my own alter-persona project and associated media histories of self-erasure, this article proposes a new conceptual identity for environmental sound recordists called the Noisy-Nonself. The Noisy-Nonself functions analogously to that of the Monster: “a strange byproduct or left over of the process of making.”<sup>10</sup> Always in the margins, “a Monstrosity never presents itself [...] it can only be mis-known.”<sup>11</sup> Historically, the monster “exceeds symbolization and can potentially rupture our sense of reality.”<sup>12</sup>

The Noisy-Nonself is a chimeric artifact, an anomalous derivative of human and nonhuman technological encounters. Film anthropologist Jean Rouch stated that the role of the recordist is that of the “taker and giver of doubles, as an eater and shower of reflections.”<sup>13</sup> The Noisy-Nonself is the noise in its own signal; hovering between presence and absence, it destabilizes notions of identity and knowing as the “monster stands on the threshold of becoming.”<sup>14</sup> The Noisy-Nonself is a true-fiction that untethers the veracity of self and site. Like the monstrous agent, it is a performative disruptor, some *thing* that might affirmatively agitate from the peripheries of audible apprehension. Bruno Latour put it well when claiming, “nonhuman actors appear first of all as trouble makers.”<sup>15</sup>

The productive potentiality of the Noisy-Nonself is simultaneously offset by the lingering threat of its own hegemonic “silence.” A history of Noisy-Nonselves echoes the colonial roots of anthropology whereby observed “others” were continually undermined through the hierarchical power figure of the non-identifiable, simultaneously silent and silencing “I.”<sup>16</sup> The power of quietude also has its aesthetic lineages in camouflage and nature hides, both of which emerge from military and stalking traditions.<sup>17</sup> Within these asymmetrical relations, it is important to transpose ethical critique onto environmental sound arts: what power dynamics are enacted by silently listening to nonhumans? Whom do “we” speak for in the continual sounding of species and phenomena? What is really being

captured and processed beyond the so-called signal? What is not being heard?

The Noisy-Nonself simultaneously invades environments and evades self-analysis; it occupies a parasite-host duality like a shimmering thing caught in its own medial web of entrapment. Reciprocal witnesses, both human and nonhuman, vibrate the field's own listening; bodies of technology, flesh and fur, cables and capillaries intersect; a singular being-in-the-world radically morphs into an exquisite corps of the multitude. To listen within such hybridized subjectivities and complex entanglements is to tune attention towards patterns of meaning within the feedback of noise. It suggests a listening out or otherwise of hard knowledge and a listening in to ethico-spectral becomings.<sup>18,19</sup>

Attempting to hear the Noisy-Nonself is therefore apophenic by nature.<sup>20</sup> Apophenia describes the phenomenon whereby clouds appear to resemble dinosaurs, rocks seem to smile, and Jesus himself emerges from a piece of burnt toast. Often anthropomorphic in process, applied in this context, apophenia facilitates a non-representational forensics of listening, both in and out of the field. The challenge for the auditioning apophenic ear is to hold onto agential relations amongst the absence of meaning or clear signal.<sup>21</sup> Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself therefore demands a new ethical commitment be heard amongst the dirty data of cryptofacts. Through its contingent materiality, the Noisy-Nonself renders the auditioning ear as an apophenic apparatus full to the brim with productive doubt.

## “I” Is Another And Another (Looped)

What are the consequences of hearing the Noisy-Nonself? The more-than-human focus of environmental sound arts must also include the microbes and bacteria that make up the bodies of recordists themselves. Nonhuman agents are not only found in environments or animals. They reside within

## The Noisy Non-Self

the monstrously intimate shadow of the self, which phases in and out of apprehension. Donna Haraway reminds us that we have never been human as our “genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such.”<sup>22</sup>

Technologies and tools of capture also occupy a “more-than” status. Materially speaking, the microphone is made from various geological elements, including the rare earth mineral Neodymium (*Nd*). Used as a magnet within microphones, it is mined directly from the ground. Boron (*B*) is another compound alternative used as a magnet within microphones. This metalloid is in fact born from cosmic ray spallation and the process of particle collision within extraterrestrial space. Copper, silicon, gold, and many other geophysical agents produce communication technologies. A “more-than-microphonic” perspective is therefore necessary if we are to rehear technology’s agential role within the broader context of acoustic ecology.

Amongst this “more-than” web, it is important to stress that the Noisy-Nonself initiates a diffractive process. It is not merely a figure of self-reflection; it is an interfering morphological agent. Building on Haraway’s “Modest Witness,” feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad claims “the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, whereas diffraction is marked by patterns of difference.”<sup>23,24</sup> The Noisy-Nonself is not a typical critical agent within the context of scholarly research. It diffracts knowledge away from notions of mimetic truth and instead propagates distortions of technologies and bodies.

The Noisy-Nonself is “more-than-reflexive.” It is a diffractive agent that brings about categorical crisis and horrific self-revelation. Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself is an apophenic search riddled with uncanny hauntings that “arrive to recount a lesson in the complexity of temporality. History is a tangle, full of loops and doublings-back.”<sup>25</sup> The temporal loops for environmental sound arts are again contained in rehearing its own asymmetric artifacts of silent hegemony and extraction: to listen back to one’s other is a self-revelatory time bending horror.

Reticent recordist histories stratify a monstrous promise and threat: the potential for hybrid identities to emerge amongst the peril of power enacted by silence. Scholarly research in environmental sound recording must listen beyond the so-called subject and rehear the enmeshed traces of

power and subjectivity that haunt all documents of capture. Archives and publications are full of catalogued Noisy-Nonselves, parasitic oscillations that trouble the margins of media materiality. If we turn up the noise in the signal, we begin to tune into the monstrous locked groove of selfhood. Layer upon layer of self-silent detritus that, if reheard, might also rewire sonic epistemologies built from the legacies of bioacoustics and acoustic ecology. Within this framing, Nature and Environmental recording can no longer be an inconsequential pursuit of the sound object. It must equally incorporate its makers and technologies in monstrous ways that speak to urgent matters of ethics, agency, and material (heard and unheard) intensities.

## Conclusion

This article has positioned sound recordists, technologies, and critical research within a more-than-human mesh. It has been a search for the Noisy-Nonself that haunts the affective vibrations and energetic phenomena of recorded sound. What lurks amongst the loss of listening is a hybridized identity, a practice-based chimera that agitates from the margins of sonic media materiality. Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself requires an apophenic ear that must swim through the dirty data of the real and imaginary, ethical and aesthetic; loops of knowing and unknowing blur with skin and fur; the field becomes a para-speculative world; a fractal glitch harboring the horror of its own echoes.

I have explored what happens when we attempt to apprehend this diffractive thing, but it is important to ask what level of care and responsibility I have towards my own Noisy-Nonself. If environmental sound recordists have historically abandoned themselves, now is the time to begin caring for such marginal and monstrous identities.<sup>26</sup> As Bruno Latour states, “Dr. Frankenstein’s crime was not that he invented a creature through some

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combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that he abandoned the creature to itself.”<sup>27</sup>

Environmental sound arts should stay with its own monsters as they provide access to inaudible affects and materialities that can productively destabilize practice orthodoxies and acoustic ecological perspectives. Listening out for the Noisy-Nonself can forge new relationships towards technology, subjectivity, and silence. The process of attempting to hear the Noisy-Nonself initiates the production of new ethical responsibilities and possibilities for practitioners and listeners, decentering human parameters of identity whilst treating the inaudible as ethico-aesthetic material that matters.

## Notes

- 1 Julian May, "Ludwig Koch and the Nature of Music," Accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/boojn4m2>.
- 2 Many practice-based examples do overtly animate such histories of self-erasure in performative ways (see Carlyle, 2009; Cusack, 2012; DeLauraneti, 2015; Polli, 2008; Wenzel, 2010; Westerkamp, 1996). The point of this essay, however, is to create a new conceptual framework (the Noisy-Nonself) in which such works might be consequently analyzed.
- 3 Ethnomusicology is primarily the study of folk music and oral traditions within their geo-social contexts. Organizations such as the Gramophone Company of London were pioneers in the early days of ethnomusicology (1902 and 1917), recording the sounds of musical cultures onto wax cylinders (Prentice, 2012). Following anthropological fieldwork traditions, recordists such as Charles Seeger and Alan Lomax are examples from the 1940's and 50's who (in distinction to Koch's focus on animal sounds) recorded the sounds of blues musicians and Appalachian folk music in their environmental contexts.
- 4 Joeri Bruyninckx, *Sound Science: Recording and Listening in the Biology of Bird Song 1880–1980* (Maastricht: Datawyse, 2013), 11–28.
- 5 Acoustic ecology is the relational study of humans and their environments as mediated through sound. This interdisciplinary field of study was developed primarily through the work of the World Soundscape Project (WSP), which was established in 1971 at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. The WSP worked to address the question "what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment, and what happens when those sounds change?" R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed., (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994), 4. "The term [soundscape] may refer to actual environments, or to abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages, particularly when considered as an artificial environment." Barry Truax, *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, CD Rom, (Montreal: Electro CD, 1999).
- 6 "Silence" along with terms such as the "inaudible" and "unheard" are deployed in this article as active agents, not absolute states. Christof Migone's use of the term "unsound" is a useful parallel here as he describes it as "a way to focus on the sonic as opposed to sound. It's not about dispensing with the materiality of sound at all really, just amplifying its range, especially discursively. The fact that unsound also means failure, flaw, and disease adds a layer that is welcome given that it returns us to the flesh—the messy side of sound. Unsound also links productively to the Body without Organs (Artaud, Deleuze/Guattari)." Mark Peter Wright, "Christof Migone," Accessed September 14, 2016, <https://earroom.wordpress.com/2015/05/19/christof-migone/>.
- 7 "The field" is understood here in its broadest sense: a site located outside the traditional boundaries of an interior studio space. This might include anything from oceanic life, street sounds, wildlife habitats, architectures, or celestial space.
- 8 Patterson-Gimlin, "Bigfoot: A Cryptid History," *Crypto Sightings*, Accessed October 23, 2016, <http://cryptosightings.com/bigfoot-a-cryptid-history>.
- 9 Marcel O'Gorman, *Necromedia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 178.

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- 10 Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 218.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms," in *The States of Theory*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 79.
- 12 Maria Beville, *The Unnameable Monster in Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 65.
- 13 Jean Rouch, "On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer," in *Ciné-ethnography*, ed. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 100.
- 14 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 20.
- 15 Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 81.
- 16 Fueled by its culpable ties to European colonialism and a male centric practice, anthropologists and feminists alike began to question anthropology's own methods and modes of representation from the 1970's onwards. James Clifford and George E. Marcus' publication, *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1987), consolidated a seismic critique upon ethnographic fieldwork, drawing attention to the crucial participant/observer relationship and histories of hegemonic authorial abuse, objectification, and exoticism.
- 17 As Hanna Rose Shell explains, camouflage is an obfuscation tactic tied into military reconnaissance and media technological development. Hiding in plain sight is a way of eavesdropping or observing a target without detection. In this asymmetric scenario, which extends to the Naturalist's hide, being invisible or inaudible enacts a position of power and hegemony over the intended recipient. Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
- 18 Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards an Ethics of Attunement* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).
- 19 Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
- 20 Apophenia is discussed in relation to a public listener who might audition environmental sound art publications, radio works, or installations. It is a mode of listening tied into playback and sound diffusion.
- 21 Agency is defined by Karen Barad as the ongoing performative relationship between humans and nonhumans: "a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has." Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 826.
- 22 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.
- 23 Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 24 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 71.
- 25 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 441.

- 26 I stress “now is the time” in relation to the Anthropocene, a much debated new geological epoch defined by the pervasive impact humans have had in radically altering the sedimentary signature of the earth. Within the context of anthropogenic acceleration and entanglement, is it plausible to claim “non-impact” anymore? Transposed onto environmental sound arts, has the long empathetic notion of non-invasive field recording become a redundant ideal that is as illusionary as so-called Nature itself?
- 27 Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” *Breakthrough Journal* 2 (2011): 21.

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# The Sonic Anthropocene: Dark Ecological Soundscapes in Chris Watson’s “Vatnajökull”

David C. Jackson

## ABSTRACT

As acoustic ecology and soundscape studies have developed alongside an ever-evident climate crisis, it has become imperative to reclaim the environmental aspects of soundscape recording and to use acoustic ecology as a way of confronting our current ecological condition. Ecological thinking challenges acoustic ecology to contend with the idea that sounds are critically connected to broader questions about environmental matters and urges soundscape artists to move beyond reflective or ecomimetic recordings towards active and exploratory ones. Soundscape researchers and artists, including Chris Watson, have been key to investigating the environment through sound and documenting ecological degradation and the concurrent silencing of the natural world. This article synthesizes work done in acoustic ecology and contemporary thinking about the Anthropocene to elaborate a “dark acoustic ecology” that listens in on the sonic conditions and effects of accelerated climate change. I examine Chris Watson’s 18 minute soundscape recording of the 10,000-year-old Icelandic glacier “Vatnajökull” from his 2003 album *Weather Report* to pose questions about what it means to think darkly about our ecological interconnections in relation to flows of space, place, time, silence, and movement.

## KEYWORDS

Anthropocene  
Ecology  
Acoustic Ecology  
Soundscape  
Chris Watson



## Ecology and Sonicity

A broad range of thinkers, including Timothy Morton, Roy Scranton, and Elizabeth Kolbert, have argued that we humans who are on this planet have entered a situation that threatens the entirety of life as we understand it.<sup>1</sup> This age has become known as the Anthropocene, a term coined by global warming and ozone depletion researcher Paul Crutzen and examined by a variety of thinkers concerned with the rapid and simultaneous changes that characterize many of our global environmental systems. The Anthropocene refers to the moment in time when humans have altered the world to the point that our presence on earth has been permanently inscribed onto the sedimentary record of the planet and possibly beyond. These changes extend far beyond global warming and include the transformation of the earth's land surface through agriculture and city building; shifting the course of rivers by damming and diverting their natural flows; fertilization; the damage to fisheries incurred by extracting vast amounts of marine life, damaging corals and coasts, and acidifying oceans; and overusing the world's freshwater supplies. Combined with industrial deforestation and fossil fuel production and usage, these changes will, in Elizabeth Kolbert's words, "leave behind a stratigraphic signature that would still be legible millions of years from now."<sup>2</sup> These changes are accompanied by a concurrent mass extinction rooted in the transformation of the chemical makeup of the environment and in the practices of globalized capitalism. Ironically, we have more knowledge about humans' impact on the world

than ever before, but it seems impossible to stop the cycle of consumption and destruction.

A number of reports and studies from the military and economic sectors detail the projected consequences of unchecked climate change, all of which have an immediate impact on our world. If climate science is accurate and the consensus is correct, incremental changes in climate will seriously weaken the global environment. The coming challenges, according to US Pacific Command, the National Security Advisor, the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Pentagon, will disrupt markets, destabilize social relations, intensify social inequalities, disrupt food and water distribution, displace large populations of people, and spread pandemics of disease. Roy Scranton details the findings of the World Bank's various reports on climate extremes, which "offer dire prognoses for the effects of global warming."<sup>3</sup> If the global temperature rises 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit within the next 100 years, we can expect a seven to eight foot rise in sea levels as ice sheets and glaciers melt, which will lead to the release of large amounts of methane gases currently trapped under ice, which could result in conditions akin to a nuclear winter or a catastrophic comet or asteroid impact.

Our world then is a series of worlds folded in on one another that interconnects biological, chemical, physical, and imaginary levels and brings us into contact with processes and species of which we may not even be aware. As a species at risk and spreading risk, we need to not just think about ecology, but following Tim Morton's ideas, to "think ecologically."<sup>4</sup> Thinking ecologically challenges practitioners and theorists of acoustic ecology to contend with thinking of soundscapes as complex ecologies. Likewise, it urges acoustic ecologists to move towards a sound practice that recognizes the soundscape as a material process in which complex weavings of the temporal, spatial, biological, and geographical mix and combine in its sonic makeup. By focusing on the sonic ecological experience as an expression of the environment, acoustic ecology could come into proximity with real ecological change and horror or what David Michael has called a "dark nature recording" that rejects the aesthetic artifice of nature recordings and closes the perceptual gap between the living world and our place within it.<sup>5</sup> The aesthetic dimension of acoustic ecology should establish the act of listening as an intense and focused expression that elaborates relationships between humans and the environments we inhabit. Active listening affords

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us the opportunity to better understand our emergent position in the world in relation to sonic space, ecology, and the movement integral to place. To actively listen is to amplify the environment of understanding, what we might call the logic of acoustic ecology, and to situate ourselves not as separate observers capturing the world but as an integral, if only a momentary, aspect of that world.

## The Soundscape and Ecology

The soundscape is a critically important part of the makeup of the world and is as important as climate, landscape, oceans, air, forests, and deserts for understanding our environment. It is therefore important to understand the soundscape in relation to the period of the Anthropocene and the associated changes that are registered both in the environment and in the soundscape. Two concepts of sound and the environment emerge as ways of thinking about ecological listening. The first, posited by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, considers the significance and impact that changes in soundscapes have upon the social and sonic environment. The second, by John Cage, draws upon ideas about the complexity and autonomy of nature to argue that sounds as a fundamental part of the environment should “be themselves.” I will briefly deal with each in turn.

Schafer defines the soundscape as “the sonic environment ... regarded as a field for study.”<sup>6</sup> In *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, he analyzes the effects of sound and noise in the environment and in everyday life, starting with the industrial revolution and increased mechanization over the last 200 years. Schafer’s discussion culminates in a critique of the modern noisy city: one threatened and brutalized by the noise of everyday lives, machinery, and media saturation. A critical social aspect to the soundscape emerges where the “general acoustic environment of a society can be read as an indicator of social conditions which produce it and may tell us much about the trending and evolution of that society.”<sup>7</sup> Schafer’s primary contribution to soundscape studies is to locate acoustic ecology within a sonic environment being degraded by urbanization, modernization, mechanization, and overconsumption.

Schafer hierarchically divides the soundscape between a “hi” and a “lo” fidelity, maintaining a rigid division between nature and culture. For Schafer, “A hi-fi system is one possessing a favorable signal-to-noise ratio ... one in which discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level.”<sup>8</sup> The hierarchy of high and low privileges the natural world, the past, and a kind of conservative and moderate quiet. This is of course a difficult division to maintain and has been critiqued from a number of perspectives for perpetuating unrealistic ideas of nature as a pristine and pure space that is perfect in its composition so long as it remains untouched by humans or technology. For Schafer, the noisy form of the soundscape brings society to a “slovenly and imperiled condition” instead of initiating “models of beautifully modulated and balanced soundscapes such as we have in great musical compositions.”<sup>9</sup> Schafer discerns in the contemporary world changes in perception and behavior that have denigrated the world from its pre-modern hi-fidelity state. The increase in noise accompanies and contributes to the gradual but significant loss of fidelity, both sonically and socially.

Schafer proposes that the damaged sonic world should be corrected through deliberate human intervention, including through the implementation of urban design and planning policies that consider the soundscape as an integral part of urban design. This idea is interesting but problematic as Schafer’s trajectory of sonic degradation moves from an Edenic pure ecology of the past into the polluted present. Recuperation of the soundscape will occur through measures like pedagogical ear-cleaning and acoustic design that recovers a hi-fi sound ecology. This return to a “pure” past is problematic as are the notions of health and cleanliness that pepper Schafer’s writings. Jonathan Sterne justifiably detects a “distinctly authoritarian preference” and a “nostalgic elitism” in Schafer’s desire for a human scale sound culture where the one voice can be heard by the many and the present is disparaged as debased and soiled.<sup>10</sup> According to Sterne, this conservative and nostalgic view of sound ignores “a whole set of phenomena that we would not necessarily assume to have anything to do with sound.”<sup>11</sup> The soundscape is entangled within the development of the world and therefore to the history of capitalism and the many changes it has brought about in living, bodily relations, spatial reorganization, and of course the environment.

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In contrast to Schafer, who seeks to intervene in acoustic environments, John Cage proposes that sounds should “be themselves.” In letting sounds “be themselves” no matter their origin, Cage develops a compositional philosophy of chance and indeterminacy that stretches out to encompass the world as a series of paradoxes and complexities that involve both human and nonhuman agencies. Natural phenomena with their own temporal and spatial non-human processes, movements, and becomings are ideal models for acoustic design. Instead of proceeding authoritatively as the creator of a composition who attends, shapes, and controls the form and content of the music with the intent that it is performed and heard in a specific setting and way, Cage relinquishes control to assemble compositions that are as purposeless as nature itself, that simply come together to endure for some time and are then gone, never to be repeated exactly the same way again. Composition as a philosophy is elevated by Cage to encompass the total environment. The novelty of creation is discovered through new kinds of listening that do not “attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of world. Just an attention to the activity of sounds.”<sup>12</sup> There is still a response in the listener but not one that evaluates the quality of the composition for a faithful reproduction of a world but instead focuses on the experience of perception. Cage, moving towards an ethics of sounds, allows for all sounds to be included in the field of music. We may interpret parts of our environment as significant, but there is much more going on in the world that we cannot fully apprehend but which can nonetheless impact on our perception.

A truly ecological approach to the natural world means leaving it free from human involvement and interference. Letting nature “go natural” has parallel and contradictory consequences that are a kind of sweet destruction: “I would let it all go to heaven and to hell at the same time. That happens automatically.”<sup>13</sup> From Cage’s all-too-human point of view, humans who interfere with nature or try to give it shape are an invasive presence as opposed to understanding their place within a complex system that includes a thing called “nature.”

## Dark Ecology

What Cage illuminates for us is the futility of trying to control nature because our deep connection to it means that an exploitation or abuse of the environment is an abuse of ourselves. The human and environment are intimately interconnected processes that cannot be separated from one another. As Jason Moore argues, “if humans are a part of nature, historical change—including the present as history—must be understood through dialectical movements of humans making environments and environments making humans.”<sup>14</sup> Thinking these interconnections is a way of thinking ecologically, a kind of thinking that, according to Morton, “includes all the ways in which we imagine how we live together” that is “profoundly about coexistence” between the human and the environment without hierarchically privileging either.<sup>15</sup> Thinking ecologically requires serious thinking about the prefix “co-” and all the meanings about things that are joined together, that are shared in common, that have mutuality and togetherness, and that ooze away from thinking the “co-” in a general sense. Common aspects of life, nature, environment, and human are “co-” from every possible position as Morton argues: “Existence is always coexistences. Human beings need each other as much as they need an environment. Human beings are each other’s environment. Thinking ecologically isn’t simply about non-human things. Ecology has to do with you and me.”<sup>16</sup> Thinking ecologically has to do with the dread of understanding the conditions generated by the Anthropocene and recognizing that the radical destabilization of the environment is also the radical dissolution of the idea that we are separate from or impervious to any process of change as the world undergoes rapid, fundamental, irreversible change.

The flickering instability, this collapsing of worlds, and our collective inability to think about the future create a darkened aesthetic that Morton calls “dark ecology,” one that “puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking.”<sup>17</sup> Dark ecology is useful for thinking about the connections between ecology and the production of aesthetic materials and lends itself particularly well to thinking about sound. Morton defines dark ecology as a depressing, weird, uncanny, and—strangely—sweet awareness of the world.<sup>18</sup> The darkness of dark ecology lies in recognizing and accepting the collapsing interconnections between our world and ourselves as far as we can still say that the world continues to

exist. Consequently, thinking through interconnectivity breaks down the myths we tell ourselves about this world: the teleology of nature, space, the West, and linear time has ceased to have relevance in a world of radical interconnection. Dark ecology opens us up to all the intensity and weirdness that the world requires for us to be truly intimate with it and produces a creative opening that disturbs our recognizable categories of human and nonhuman in ways that trouble consistent and stable notions of being. Dark ecology interrupts and breaks the anthropocentric superiority of human being, forcing us to think darkly: what does the world look like without pollinators or slime molds or certain grasses? How far can we go before things really begin to get too bad to return? Do we know if we have reached that moment yet or not? Dark thinking focuses our attention on the innumerable micro-elements that we normally push away from thinking about in our daily life to our awareness, obliging a reckoning with things like our waste, ice melt, Styrofoam, consumption, and so on.

Dark ecology makes us feel uneasy about the natural world due both to its complexity as an object and our inability to fully understand it even on a basic level while insisting on our ability to manage and “fix” whatever errors we might have produced. Our view of nature is impossibly contradictory, offering innumerable justifications for horror (dog eat dog, survival of the fittest) and also acting as an imaginary model for holistic and harmonious existence within the world. As Morton writes, “Since the Romantic period, nature has been used to support the capitalist theory of value and to undermine it; to point out what is intrinsically human, and to exclude the human; to inspire kindness and compassion, and to justify competition and cruelty.”<sup>19</sup> This flickering “in-between” indicates the separation in our thinking about nature even as we recognize our fundamental connection to the world’s processes. The current crisis and shift in our global ecological awareness trouble the flickering as it centers us as a key actor in the world’s destruction. Recognizing our central role brings the world rushing towards us, and the objective separation that we have based so much of our relationship to nature upon collapses.

## The Sonic Anthropocene: Soundscape, Place, Movement

Chris Watson offers one of the best of examples of thinking a dark acoustic ecology through the recording and composing of soundscapes. Watson, a member of the 1970s avant-garde post-punk band Cabaret Voltaire, is best known now for his work as a documentary field recordist who has also produced a number of radio documentaries about sound for the BBC. Watson's 2003 album *Weather Report* directly poses questions about dark ecological thinking as it pertains to flows of weather, instabilities of place, movements of time, and the sound and silences of environmental transformation. Watson's recordings alter our perceptions beyond a representation of the ecological toward what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari characterize as a bloc of sensation that considers the recording as an active thing itself.<sup>20</sup> The liner notes to *Weather Report* indicate that each 18 minute-long track is a time-compression of various long duration recordings of certain places, atmospheric moods, and locations. These include Kenya's Masai Mara, a large game reserve and national park, which Watson recorded over a 14-hour period on Thursday, October 17, 2002, from 5:00 a.m. to 7 p.m.; recordings of Scotland's highland glens, which were composed over a duration of 4 months from September to December; and the final recording of the Icelandic glacier Vatnajökull as it melts and flows into the Norwegian sea. These tracks capture the unstable and shifting rhythms of animals, land, marine, atmospheric ecologies, and processes of change. More pertinently, these tracks capture the sound of worlds in dissolution and express what Rob Nixon calls a "slow violence" that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>21</sup>

The glacier itself is connected to the environment and to dark ecology. As an object in the environment, it is associated with the dire prognosis of global warming as outlined above. The glacier's changing state directly contributes to the rise in the sea level and the release of methane gases, and yet its location in a national park means that it is also an important place connected to tourism and subsequently the tourist economy of Iceland. Vatnajökull is therefore a weird object for ecology: one that seems solid but is rapidly in movement, that is intimately connected and subject to larger environmental changes, that is linked to the processes of capitalism, but that has also existed for much longer than capitalism itself.

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It is connected to volcanic activity, flows of water, other glaciers proximate to it, and the many species that survive off of it. We are connected to Vatnajökull even if we have never come near it.

Watson's recording of a glacier melting due to climate change expresses the dark ecological object that flickers between different levels of beings, spaces, and times and troubles the ecomimetic and representational aspects of soundscape recording. The recording does not simply represent the sound of the glacier for us to consume but instead acts as an environment that we inhabit through listening. The liner notes state "The weather has created and shaped all our habitats. Clearly it also has a profound and dynamic effect upon our lives and that of other animals."<sup>22</sup> This dynamism does not come from the recognition that a bird is chirping or that something sounds strange but through the experience of the recording that activates a complex interconnection between ourselves and Vatnajökull. Reviews of the disc focus on the representational sounds of birds, creaking ice, and the dawn or dusk choruses of animals, but the most significant aspect of *Weather Report* is Watson's rethinking of time and the compression of place through the recording a variety of ecological durations over its three tracks. As an object of dark ecology, the glacier is a weird uncanny sonic thing, musical and geological, immediate and distant, familiar and strangely unknown, and modulating connections between the human and the non-human. These dynamics are related to climate transformations and their effects, where change is happening at different scales and shaping diverse biotic worlds, at both a molar and molecular level of biology, chemistries, geologies, and atmospheres.

Dark ecology brings the immensity of the planet down to multiple and specific scales of time and space, which makes things seem weird:

Our sense of the planet is not a cosmopolitan rush but rather the uncanny feeling that there all kinds of places at all kinds of scale: dinner table, house, street, neighborhood, Earth, biosphere, ecosystem, city, bioregion, country, tectonic plate ... and perhaps more significantly: bird's nest, beaver's dam, spider web, whale migration pathway, wolf territory, bacterial microbiome.<sup>23</sup>

Different places cannot be disconnected from the variety of their temporal scales, which are attached to the unfolding of their existence in space and time. This includes a variety of different entanglements of human and non-human entities and actors, unfolding and folding around one another:

"dinner party, family generation, evolution, climate, (human) 'world history,' DNA, lifetime, vacation, geology; and again the time of wolves, the time of whales, the time of bacteria."<sup>24</sup> "Vatnajökull" locates our listening in proximity to different scales of time that shift across the long durations of geological formation and dissolution. The temporal and spatial aspects unfold in relation to the significant but unaccounted and invisible presence of the recording apparatus and Watson himself as a human-technological presence that persists temporally in the recording like a ghostly machine capturing and storing time.

The soundscapes of *Weather Report* are flickering phenomena that oscillate between a significant presence and a subtle background, depending on where our listening is focused. This fluctuating foregrounding and backgrounding of the soundscape is a textural effect that also flickers between the human and the non-human and perceptive and affective experiences of the glacial soundscape as it transforms how we listen and hear the environment. As stated above, soundscape recordings create conditions for amplifying the perceptual and sensational elements found and captured in their recording rather than representing a specific sound. The soundscape recording is an event in process and motion rather than a static and fixed sonic document. Listening to the recording pulls back layers of sound. The materials that produce the soundscape are an integral part of the creation of the sensation itself; the soundscape is not simply the apprehension of the sound but also the thick textures in the environment, the ear of the recorder who is listening, and the affective relay to the next listener.

The glacier precedes both machine and human by thousands of years, having been formed and retreated and reformed again over a span of about three thousand years. The recording captures not just groans, chirps, trickles, drips, flows, and the odd moaning of the glacier but also the deep time layers of a particular geologic history, bringing the temporal together with the geologic. In listening to "Vatnajökull" we become a part of the place we are listening to, scaling up and down various biotic and geologic interrelations within the different ecologies that they inhabit. Being positioned in this way moves us towards considering the ethics that situates us in a spatial field or ecology and subsequently in relation to everything else around us in that moment in time. Ethics then becomes a negotiation that is partial, temporary, and which "implicate[s] us, perforce, in the lives of human

others, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall respond to our temporary meeting up with these particular rocks and stones and trees.”<sup>25</sup> Ethics, sounds, and ecologies come together as a multiplicity of events, encounters, and situated temporalities.

For Morton, this is due to a place’s connection with time, which is related to his notion of “the hyperobject,” a scalable object that blurs the boundaries between ourselves and the things we encounter in the world.<sup>26</sup> Some hyperobjects can be experienced, but many are inaccessible or only partially accessible although they remain no less real. The accelerated rate of the ice melting sounds the actual dissolution of a hyperobject, contributing to the overall soundscape and sonics we encounter and attend to in listening. We also hear the melt flowing into the Norwegian Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, mixing the glacier’s temporalities with the ebbs and flows of the ocean and presumably the ecosystemic processes of evaporation, cloud gathering, and eventual rainfall. We can question whether we detect in the recording the future of rising sea levels or atmospheric conditions gathering into a weather system. These two examples barely scratch the surface of possible temporalities that Watson’s recorder may have picked up. For example, birds nesting, feeding, and resting on or around the glacier have temporal scales that cannot be apprehended by our own perception as do the microorganisms that are no doubt residing in the waters and being transferred by the glacier’s flows. Speculatively, Watson’s recorder has captured a number of frequencies unavailable to humans such as whales and other ocean creatures, inaudible atmospherics, and a variety of time and spaces beyond our grasp. Listening to the recording of Vatnajökull, we encounter deep temporalities that unsettle the milieus of perceived human time. The recording captures a number of different levels of vibrant materials that we could generally categorize as non-human or post-anthropocentric.

Acknowledging this broadens our treatment of art and media to “allow us to consider the connections of the organic human bodies in the organic and nonorganic surroundings.”<sup>27</sup> Watson’s *Weather Report* moves us towards a sonic ethics that recognizes that what exists beyond our own sensible and perceptual apparatus affects us in ways we are only remotely aware of as humans. How do we relate to a glacier and the changes it is undergoing? Where does our responsibility to the ecological lie? Jussi Parikka notes an urgent need for an ethics of the “posthuman” that

highlights the “lack of certainty of what constitutes the human brought about by scientific, technological, and ecological forces.”<sup>28</sup> Détourning the Situationist International’s practice of psychogeography to account for a world beyond the urban and beyond the human, Parikka proposes a psychogeophysics which, like Morton’s “ecology without nature,” breaks the ecomimetic aesthetic of “nature” art and “establish[es] proximity, map[s] the links, the continuum of medianatures” to incorporate positions that acknowledge all aspects of the ecology in question.<sup>29</sup>

Doreen Massey, who also considers issues of proximity and flux, asks a critical question about locating a specific place where everything is moving: “if everything is moving where is here?” For Watson, the answer may be that here is everywhere, both as a relationship to sound and as an expression of sonic ontology, from the galaxy to our DNA. The important thing for Morton and his project is to disconnect anthropocentric “Nature” from our idea of ourselves and existence, place being a part of that fuzzy blur of contradictory things: “A human being is an ecosystem of nonhumans, a fuzzy set like a meadow, or the biosphere, a climate, a frog, a eukaryotic cell, a DNA strand.”<sup>30</sup> Massey’s argument is that the crux of place relies on the displacing movements of the geographic and temporal features of place, which means that being situated in a place is always part of a process of sinking, spinning, bouncing, and moving.

According to Massey, place is rhythmical and involves negotiations between human and non-human actors in a space or on a plane where “spatial narratives meet up or form configurations, conjunctures of trajectories which have their own temporalities … where the successions of meetings, the accumulations of weaving and encounters build up a history.”<sup>31</sup> As the glacier melts, it also moves across the tectonic plates; as the glacier melts, tourists flock to see it and traverse its dissolving field; as the glacier melts, ecosystems disappear and force liquid, microbial, and animal migrations. The movement of these many things occurs beyond ourselves and involves geology, plants, and animals, atmospheres and particles across extreme durations that confound the human. We are in place as the “here and now” but also involved in the “there and then” encompassing a number of interconnections, the “weaving of a process of space-time” that is thrown together and always unstable. The soundscape is a pertinent example for understanding and sensing the continuous and accelerating changes that

## The Sonic Anthropocene

the Anthropocene has released because the soundscape as an environment undergoes a continuous and constantly audible shift.

The sonicity of the Anthropocene therefore makes us acutely aware, if we care, about temporal scales of change and acceleration that extend far beyond human being and brings new rhythms into our everyday lives at paces that often feel as though we are just barely keeping up. Noise and silence take on an urgent expression of the limits of temporality and duration in the Anthropocene. Composers attuned to the environment (like Chris Watson or, retrospectively, Cage) are dark ecological thinkers of the Anthropocene, who through the urgency and immediacy of the soundscape expose the futility of worrying about the temporality of it all; that our delayed response is already too late; and that the processes that may bring about extreme changes in our worlds have already been loosed and are creating new rhythms and patterns that cannot be easily reversed as we live through them. Cage recognizes the multiplicity of human being as a complex phenomenon in relation to “nature” that does not necessarily depend on a human creating because the world is always already creating something. In contrast, Schafer wants the human to intervene deliberately and drastically with the sound world. Both then recognize a compositional element to the world, but Cage formulates a clearer ecology of sound that is already a part of the becoming of the world.

Hence, we need to accept the fact that there is no turning back and that the very real possibility of life on earth, especially as we know it and are wrapped up in it, will transform its current pattern, shift and pivot, and leave us behind: “it may be that we have crossed the summit of our knowledge and power, and the brief explosion of human life in the Holocene will turn out to have been as transient as an algae bloom.”<sup>32</sup> It does not matter whether or not you believe climate science: the change has already and irreversibly been wrought, and there can be no turning back the clock to a utopian moment of the “before” time. Nor can the future reliably be a place to put our hope. There is no point in demonstrating the inconsistencies in weather patterns and rabidly noting contradictions between viewpoints: there are contradictions because the environmental system never made any sense, and the order imposed on nature, atmosphere, climate, and geology was only a human conceit—the dream of domination that was constructed mythologically in an attempt to make sense (how stunning that phrase) of the insensible.

Sound then as an artistic expression of the conditions of the world draws attention to the sensations contained in the artwork. The development and intensification of communications technologies and the development and refinement of neoliberalism's social and economic tendencies disclose themselves both in the changing nature of the soundscape and in the capturing of those perceptions within the artwork. Acoustic ecology recognizes and makes explicit the fundamental relational aspects between sound, hearing, listening, recording, and the environmental space created through the interactions of those elements. Creation or art is an encounter between a person and their experience of the work where works are no longer concerned with the formation of imagined reality but become ways of organizing everyday life and being active in the world. Imagination opens spaces between people to reflect, think, question, and suggest possibilities to critically engage with other ways of being. Artists or musicians dialogue through and with these realities to make and remake new realities or forms. Morton writes, "ecology permeates all forms" in a radically open way: "all art—not just explicitly ecological art—hardwires the environment into its *form*. Ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art, isn't just *about* something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth). Ecological art *is* something, or maybe it *does* something."<sup>33</sup> Art—and ideally politics—is about the potential and possibility manifest in the dialogue about becoming.

## Notes

- 1 There is a burgeoning literature on the Anthropocene as well as a number of arguments about the accuracy and appropriateness of the term. See for example Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; Moore, 2016; Scranton, 2015; Wark, 2015. In August of 2016, the Working Group on the Anthropocene formally put forward a recommendation to acknowledge that the Holocene was to give way to the Anthropocene.
- 2 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, First Picador ed. (New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2015).
- 3 Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2015), 15.
- 4 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- 5 David Michael, "Toward a Dark Nature Recording," *Organised Sound* 16, no. 3 (December 2011): 206–10, doi:10.1017/S1355771811000203.
- 6 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1993), 274.
- 7 Ibid., 7.
- 8 Ibid., 43.
- 9 Ibid., 237.
- 10 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 343.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 10.
- 13 Stephen Montague, "John Cage at Seventy: An Interview," *American Music* 3, no. 2 (1985): 205, doi:10.2307/3051637.
- 14 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, 1st ed. (New York: Verso, 2015), 28.
- 15 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 4.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 16.
- 18 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.
- 19 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 19.
- 20 In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the artwork does not preserve either the creator or the experience of the audience but instead the percepts and affects that make up a "bloc of sensation" which is the "thing or work of art." Sensation, percept, and affect go beyond feelings and perceptions to become "beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived." For more, see Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Gilles Deleuze and Félix

- Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 21 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), 2.
  - 22 Chris Watson, *Weather Report*, CD, 2003.
  - 23 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 10.
  - 24 Ibid., 10.
  - 25 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington D.C.: Sage Publications, 2005), 141.
  - 26 Morton ambiguously defines a hyperobject in his book *Hyperobjects* as a “thing that is massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” An example of a hyperobject would be Styrofoam, an oil field, a black hole, urbanism, plastic, the biosphere, or even the solar system. They are characterized as being sticky or viscous in that they stick to beings; they are nonlocal and operate outside of human spacetime; their effects are experienced interobjectively and are not a function of human knowledge but have a significant role to play. Most significantly, hyperobjects are a crucial factor in the end of the world. What I do find useful in the idea of the hyperobject is the weird and contradictory nature of the correlation between humans, things, and environments.
  - 27 Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Electronic Mediations, volume 46 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 62.
  - 28 Ibid., 63.
  - 29 The psychogeophysical has resonance here with the psychogeography as developed in the 1950s by the Situationist International. As Parikka notes, the term psychogeography contains a “geography,” and Debord mentions both soil and climate in his writings on the topic. For more, see Parikka, 2015.
  - 30 Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 70.
  - 31 Massey, *For Space*, 139.
  - 32 Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, 116.
  - 33 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 11.

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- . *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- . *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Posthumanities 27. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
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# **COLLISION**

Imagined Drone Ecologies:  
Listening to Vibracathedral  
Orchestra

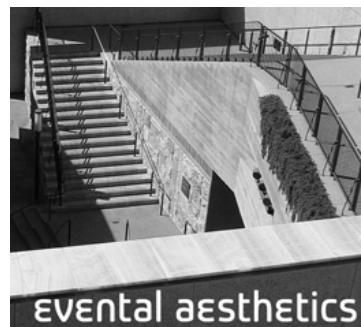
Owen Coggins

## ABSTRACT

In this short piece, I describe a performance by Vibracathedral Orchestra in which the musicians collectively create an atmosphere of gradually coalescing and dissolving plateaus of droning sound. That this collective sound-making (and listening) can offer an aesthetic conducive to contemplating environment and aesthetics I demonstrate as well as describe in reporting my responses to the performance, drifting from description into a more imaginative realm of speculation on urban space, plants, concrete, time, memory, and the productive flowering ruin of cities and bodies. Returning with the end of the performance to more conventional description, the short review performatively enacts the potential for drone music to evoke, challenge, and explore an imaginative aesthetics of environmental sound.

## KEYWORDS

Drone  
Utopia  
Nature  
Imagination  
Ecology



## February 9, 2014, Café Oto, London

It's good to get inside out of the London dark and rain, get a drink and a seat in the venue's gradually filling small space with the price of tickets on the chalkboard outside recently rubbed away, written over with the words "SOLD OUT." After a brief period warming up around the tiny candle on the table, support act Blood Stereo appears behind a table piled with electronic equipment and cables and begins to set in motion their shifting sonic collage of found curiosities, recordings from radio, and slowed down or treated samples with added hisses, drones, and scratches as the performers Karen Constance and Dylan Nyoukis deem appropriate. Different platforms of sound are built from these collected straws and bits of colored string, then disassembled and reconfigured around other planks: what sounds like an Italian or Spanish instrumental classic-rock-out, perhaps looped or edited, under a fuzz of static; some repetitive speech, instructions of some sort, slowed down to a maddening, drawling solipsism; some folky string pluckings, which appear hesitantly in the distance before wandering off elsewhere, lost and uncertain. Movements take shape and then gradually disperse as cassette tapes run down, play out, or are replaced at a musician's whim.

This kind of sound is here presented as music but is made up of elements that may otherwise and elsewhere be considered (or ignored) as noise. This gesture of recontextualization of ready-mades or found objects in art is of course a familiar one, already a hundred years old, but for me the particular qualities of repositioned sound as textured temporal space afford greater possibilities than objects in a gallery for prompting modes of

thought which incorporate drifting daydreams as well as critical reflection. The deployment of noises and sounds, recognizable or indistinguishably combined, and the indeterminate and changing orientation of the listener are a starting point for sparking speculative thought. As Michel Serres and Jacques Attali have observed, noise occupies multiple positions and relations: it can be understood as signal and interruption of signal, message as well as channel, elusively and interchangeably both host and parasite.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the particularity of sound as a medium which allows apprehension of shifting patterns extending in time can make possible imaginary explorations of environments in unpredictable reverie while simultaneously structuring an actual environment of vibrations in space.

Now, after a break, the six musicians of tonight's incarnation of the Vibracathedral Orchestra circulate around and then gather in the space at the front from which the table has been cleared. It's almost like a playpen between a triangle of three chairs, a collection of assorted bits and pieces, horns, microphones, guitars, unusual instruments, and other curiosities. "We're gonna play for a while. Feel free to get up, go outside for a smoke, go to the bar. We don't want no reverence." Each multi-instrumentalist casts around for one or other of the oboes, horns, hooters, tooters, bashers, squeakers, and squawkers and begins merrily trumpeting their dissonant honks and pattering circles. Each noise seems to be completely indifferent to the others while simultaneously contributing to a communal chaos as each note loses its distinction in the general loudness. The din continues for some time ... is it always going to be like this? How many minutes has it already been? Have we always been here?

Over the nearly twenty years of their hovering existence, the Vibracathedral Orchestra have primarily included Neil Campbell, Mick Flower, Bridget Hayden, Julien Bradley, and Adam Davenport, featuring additional or fewer sound-makers as situations dictate for the coming together of their buzzing, whirling, glittering drones. The sounds are constructed by each player peeping or bowing or tapping along in little elliptical patterns on whatever noise-making tool is at hand, each musician contributing individually insignificant scraps or phrases or bits of junk, which (with the right spark of arbitrary magic) come together to form a collective bird's-nest UFO of transcendental shimmering reverie. I'm not sure how I first heard of them, but their humming organic electricity alongside other underground entities like Hototogisu and sometimes Ashtray

## Imagined Drone Ecologies

Navigations caught my ears as invoking a kind of sound I call “levitation drone.”

Gradually, the individual lines of each player become distinguishable with wavering notes and recognizable timbres separating themselves from the mixture. At the back of the instrument-strewn performance area, a horn is placed on the floor and a round drum taken up in its place. A measured thumping emerges, and the different threads begin to wind themselves around that rhythm. Sounds coalesce to form a compelling groove, relying on no melody nor led by any particular instrument but propelled by some mysterious collective sentience in sound. For the next hour and a bit, an endless variety of overlapping and intertwining sounds constructs layers and plateaus, pieced together intuitively and spontaneously from organic sound components, before dismantling themselves just as casually. A sound will fall away as a musician drops out, following a momentary instinct to replace their instrument with another that lies close at hand; without seeming to react directly to each action or change, the assemblage of noises slowly, impassively reorients and recombines. A new raft of woven sound is reconfigured out of similar branches and twigs, setting off on a different course directed by the winds of collaborative chance rather than intention. I close my eyes, for a while just listening to the detailed mixture of sounds with no broad melody or sweeping narrative to follow. Unsteadily at first but then with more confident balance, leaving behind the scaffolding of individual action, the spinning wheel of sound lifts off the ground.

Slowly, the scattered surfaces of insistent, intricate noises in implacably revolving plateaus give way to strange, imaginary vistas ... the abandoned roof of a crumbling tower block overrun with climbing creepers affords a view over a forgotten city, submerged in jungly tendrils ... in a becalmed haze, turn to descend the tower beneath the surface of the green ... at first down worn corroded concrete stairs that become ever more thickly choked with vegetation ... until the easiest path is to step out through the twentieth-floor windows, long since absent of glass, supported by branches, stalks, thick leaves, a slow tumble through ever denser foliage until a headfirst, steady scramble downwards, suspended by forgiving green layers. At last, reaching the ground, the base of the tower is the foot of a vast tree ... sit, breathe for a moment, surrounded by tiny birds ... a seed, then roots, and a tree trunk grows inside my chest, squeezing then becoming my lungs, until the carapace of the body's shell splits, unfurls, and falls away ... the head

topples off, rolls, settles, and bursts into purple and red, orange and pink flowers. The tree gets stronger, thicker, grows, curled leaf, bark of the old body rips and tears, stomped into atoms of dirt, ferried away by insects and renewed ... green shoots, moss on the side of the tree. High rise ruin, forest gravity ... tree growing skin discarded, electric storm ... a slow explosion of rain-pelted flowers ... riot, wither, lush return ... rust unclasps its fingers... concrete submits, relaxes grip, dissolves ... laughs, crumbles, sings, hums ... shreds ... breaks ... offers up, lays down ... sighs, breathes ... opens its hands, its leaves ...

What is it about this series of composite drones that can occasion this oscillation in imagined bodily identification between concrete and tree, urban ruin and organic renewal, animal and plant, altitude and grounding? Is this weird flowering of meditative consciousness out of musical engagement anything other than a mere novelty in unfolding interior oddness, a transitory escapism, or can it afford lasting effects in orientation towards environments and ecologies beyond the realms of the imagination and the concert venue? Theorists of altered consciousness and mysticism from William James to Henri Bergson to Aldous Huxley have asserted that such states or “experiences” will remain private, isolated, and inaccessible unless integrated into transformations in ethical comportment and social life.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as observed by others such as Stephen Katz and Michel de Certeau, it is not “experiences” that exist in social space but texts, communications, manipulations of words and sounds such as this present description of engagement with music.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps a hint towards potential real effects of reported reverie can be found in the apparent democratic-organic formations of the group’s collective action, where the unpredictable and undirected movements or inclinations of each sound-maker nevertheless contribute to a holistic something with its own open-ended logic of being. This practice does the work of planting seeds of participation, which include attentive listening, welcoming and inviting fellow world-dwellers into the communal space of shared sound. The collaborative sound at first just is—and then is moving in unknown directions—even towards a transformative conception of what it might be like to inhabit a living, imagining body held in and freed by and joined with others in strange vibrational space yet untied from the specifics of being a *human* body in sound. Weird drone music as a radically other arena of experience, a fragile and tentative potential world, transitiorily inhabited and explored.

## Imagined Drone Ecologies

The final squall dissipates, and the rounded gentle collapse of the collective noise brings applause, cheers, and a blinking awakening from those who might have travelled farther off. Even several of the musicians look up as if assuming that the sound has drawn to a natural close. But a delicate, unusual guitar line uncurls out of the dissolving debris, lovely peculiar notes unfamiliar to language. Unconcerned or even unaware of the expectations of the performance having finished, the winding ribbon continues to find its way, fragile but resilient, refusing a deferential fading-out or a resolution into acquiescent melody. Other tones, peeps, and drones retune their antennae, reconfigure around this lilting, becalmed, but inquisitive coda. With relaxed smiles and breaths, this family of noises provides a brief quiet period of reflection, reintegration, a slow walk up a warm beach, an inhale-exhale of slow intention, a foundational grounding after strange journeys to weird and remote utopias.

## Notes

- 1 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, 1902); Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911); Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1945); Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956).
- 3 Stephen T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. I: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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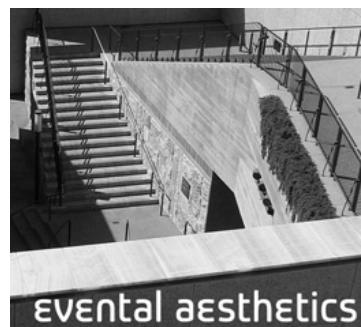
# Cognizant Perception: The Case for a Critical-Affective Ambience

Sophie Knezic

## 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.

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