The Sonic Witness

On the Political Potential of Field Recordings in Acoustic Art

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary sonic artworks often use field recordings from places of historic or social significance to address political issues. This article discusses relevant works for radio and fixed media by Peter Cusack, Jacob Kirkegaard, Eliška Cílková, Anna Friz and Public Studio, Stéphane Garin and Sylvestre Gobart, Ultra-red, and Matthew Herbert and outlines how they use both audio and visual/textual information to create awareness of the issues inscribed in these places, from current environmental concerns to the memory of genocide and displacement.

In his seminal 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin claims that there is one immaterial quality of an artwork that necessarily evades reproduction, and that is its genuineness:

> The genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears. . . . We can encapsulate what stands out here by using the term "aura" [1].

John Mowitt [2] has shown how the concept of aura—and its decay—can be applied fruitfully to acoustic art forms. Mowitt's focus is on *The Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility,* but it opens up perspectives for applying Benjamin's concepts to nonmusical sonic artworks as well. For instance, the aspects of aura quoted above—the genuineness of an artifact bearing witness to a specific time and place—are crucial to the aesthetic of an increasing number of artistic practices that have been emerging across various genres of acoustic art in recent years. These practices share a concern with political issues, and they all address these issues by using field recordings from specific places with particular historical or social significance. The following discussion of some examples of such practices will show how the politics

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of the practices are tied to an idea of the genuineness of the documentary recordings they employ, which, as we have seen, also informs Benjamin's concept of the aura.

Benjamin saw the demise of aura as liberating, with reproduction technology bridging the gap between iconic artworks and "the masses"—a tool for the democratization of culture. Therefore, his text tends to cast aura as something deeply reactionary, if not fascist. In the works I discuss here, however, the contextualized use of field recordings is a means "*to politicize art*" [3] in a progressive way, as advocated by Benjamin. At first glance, the aura-based strategy of these works would seem to contradict Benjamin's negative view of aura, but upon closer analysis these works confirm Mowitt's insight that Benjamin's terminology must be understood in its historical context, which "implies that the question of aura must always be posed anew, even if the question means something different each time" [4].

The obvious difference between music (and its technological reproduction)—as discussed by Mowitt qua Benjamin—and field recordings is that musical works exist as original human artifacts before they are reproduced. In contrast to this, field recordings are original artifacts themselves, because what ontologically precedes them is not a "more original" artwork but simply acoustic reality. It is only through the act of recording that they become artifacts at all. Only through recording do parts of the sonic continuum acquire the possibility of becoming aesthetic objects to be passed on through time and bear witness to a recordist's presence at a certain place and time in history.

Bearing witness is also a key factor in Peter Cusack's practice of "sonic journalism," exemplified in his project *Sounds from Dangerous Places:*

> Sonic journalism is based on the idea that all sound, including non-speech, gives information about places and events and that careful listening provides valuable insights different from, but complementary to, visual images and language. . . . In my view sonic journalism occurs when field recordings are allowed adequate space and time to be

heard in their own right, when the focus is on their original factual and emotional content, and when they are valued for what they are rather than as source material for further work as is often the case in sound art or music [5].

The reference to "factual content" and the choice of the term "journalism," with its associated codes of objectivity, veracity and fact-checking, emphasizes Cusack's trust in sound recording as a "witness" of certain places and conditions. The recordist acts as a reporter gathering information in places of danger, "whether it is pollution, social injustice, military or geopolitical. The project asks, 'What can we learn by listening to the sounds of dangerous places?'" [6]

The lesson of Cusack's recordings from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine and the Caspian Oil Fields in Azerbaijan—the two places that feature most prominently in Cusack's project—seems to be this: Even when we know that these places are emblematic of the operation of technologies and policies that endanger life on our planet, they "can be both sonically and visually compelling, even beautiful and atmospheric. There is, often, an extreme dichotomy between an aesthetic response and knowledge of the 'danger'" [7].

Cusack's sounds encourage listeners to contemplate, in the very act of listening, the network of social and political significations and power structures within which his "dangerous places" are enmeshed. Sound seems ideal for addressing the dependencies and ambiguities related to these places because "listening situates us within a relational frame whose focus, clarity, and directness are endlessly supplemented and displaced by the subtle pulses, mishearings, and fragmentary richness of relating" [8]. The veracity of the "historical witness" presenting these recordings is crucial in getting listeners to engage with this network of associations. After all, why should they follow the artist's invitation to reflect upon a place he claims he recorded if it turns out he lied to them in the first place?

The peculiar aesthetic quality of dangerous places, particularly the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, has inspired many other artists. Jacob Kirkegaard has captured the atmosphere of its deserted buildings in *Four Rooms* (Touch Records, 2006) and *Wermutstropfen* (West German Radio, 2011). The latter piece, a collage of field recordings, is closest to Cusack's documentary approach. *Four Rooms,* on the other hand, employs a Lucier-inspired process of playing the sounds of empty rooms back in the same rooms and re-recording them. The resulting resonant drones heighten the sense of looming danger. In her piece *Zone* (Czech Radio, 2013), Eliška Cílková actively engages with sound sources found onsite, "seeking out the abandoned musical instruments of the Chernobyl Zone in order to visit and record them" [9]. Kirkegaard's and Cílková's strategies are not purely documentary as Cusack's are, yet the integrity of their work equally relies on the aura of the real place: The broken piano one hears in *Zone* gains much of its emotional impact from the knowledge that it was in fact abandoned due to a nuclear disaster.

While an image presents itself as an object that allows the viewer to step back and distance herself from it, sound "is not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear *in*" [10]. As Tim Ingold argues, the sound of a place enters the listener's body just like breath, which creates a compelling symbol for the listener's connection to a place and the bodily presence of others that were there before her. Thus, field recordings are also suitable for alluding to *What Isn't There,* as in the title of an installation project by Anna Friz and Public Studio. In gathering the sonic materials for *What Isn't There,* the artists sought out the sites of former Palestinian villages in Israel in March 2014 and would "just simply record whatever we found there" [11], from parking lots to factories to war memorials: "These sorts of things told us a lot about how much things have changed but also just sort of what memories are still retained by the landscape" [12].

A similar attempt at representing absence through field recordings is *Gurs. Drancy. Gare de Bobigny. Auschwitz. Birkenau. Chelmo-Kulmhof. Majdaneck. Sobibor. Treblinka* by Stéphane Garin and Sylvestre Gobart (Gruenrekorder/ Bruit Clair, 2011), which captures the sounds from the sites of former concentration camps and other sites related to the Nazi-perpetrated genocide, which are meticulously listed in the title. As in *Sounds from Dangerous Places,* the contrast between the apparent innocuousness of the soundscape and the atrocities committed in the very same places stirs listeners' imaginations.

A different, yet related, type of political artwork based on field recordings uses the sounds of political demonstrations as source material for electronic music. *La Economía Nueva (Operation Gatekeeper)* by Ultra-red (Fat Cat Records, 2001) or "The Whisper of Friction" by Radio Boy (aka Matthew Herbert) from the album *The Mechanics of Destruction* (Accidental Records, 2001) respectively credit as sound sources a demonstration against the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border at the San Isidro Port of Entry on 10 December 2000 and anti-globalization protests in London on 1 May 2001. By placing the sounds of demonstrations at the heart of their practice, these works encourage political activism on the part of their listeners without indoctrinating them. These works also validate the "agonistic" view that in a living democracy, not only should political differences be negotiated in the sphere of parliamentary politics, they should also be played out in public places "where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation" [13], thus keeping the process of political engagement in motion. Like the other artists discussed here, the strategy of Ultra-red and Radio Boy relies on the truthfulness of the claim that the source recordings were actually made at the rallies.

As works of sonic art, all of the artworks discussed here rely heavily on the specific experiential quality of listening to their actual sound, but they only become signifiers in a political discourse through the listener's knowing that they come from places with specific connotations. This knowledge, however, cannot be transmitted by the ear alone. Therefore, the works examined above supplement their sonic elements with additional information in the form of photographs and/ or text—as CD liner notes or whole books—to establish a contract of veracity with the listener and to "engage the rich

cultural, technical, social, ontological implications of [the sounds'] origins" [14].

In other words, these works use sound as part of a larger conceptual strategy, as advocated by Seth Kim-Cohen in his book *In the Blink of an Ear*. This differentiates these sound artists' take on field recordings from two major traditions that also draw on recordings of ambient sounds. Much electroacoustic music in the tradition of Pierre Schaeffer uses field recordings as raw materials for the extraction of sonic objects, proposing that audiences should "listen to the *objet sonore* blindly, ignoring who or what might have made it, with what materials, or for what purpose" [15]. Acoustic ecol-

ogy, on the other hand, is predicated on using audio recordings to preserve intact soundscapes of mostly natural origin. This practice often risks turning a deaf ear to the social and political aspects of the acoustic lifeworld, thus "undermining the soundscape in general, for what the soundscape (and the environment in general) teaches us is that place is always more than its snapshot" [16]. In the works presented above, however, enough information about the places is provided to spark a critical discussion of the related issues. By raising issues of origin, context and agenda in relation to field recordings, the concept of aura can help to bring out the political significance of such audio material.

References and Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 7.

2 John Mowitt, "The Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility," in Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge 2012) p. 213–224

3 Benjamin [1] p. 38, original italics.

4 Mowitt [2] p. 220.

5 Peter Cusack, *Sounds from Dangerous Places* (Thornton Heath: ReR MEGACORP, 2012) p. 23.

6 Cusack [5] p. VII.

7 Cusack [5] p. VII.

8 Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York, London: Continuum, 2011) p. 182.

9 Eliška Cílková, "ZONE": <www.rozhlas.cz/radiocustica_english/project/_zprava/eliska-cilkova-zone–1273642> (accessed 14 December 2014).

10 Tim Ingold, "Against Soundscape," in Angus Carlyle, ed., *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007) p. 11.

11 Anna Friz interviewed by Meira Asher, "RA106fm_#05," on "Radioart 106fm," 03:08: <www.mixcloud.com/radioart106fm/ra106fm_prgrm05_anna-friz/> (accessed 14 December 2014).

12 Friz [11].

13 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London, New York: Verso, 2013) p. 92.

14 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York, London: Continuum, 2009) p. 115.

15 Kim-Cohen [14] p. xvi.

16 Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York, London: Continuum, 2006) p. 205.

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