



Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

Many people are currently recording and working with environmental sounds. In recent years with the development of relatively cheap and portable equipment has enabled a wide variety of people to record and make use of the sounds around us.

From the more traditional idea of recording nature, to the ideas of amplifying the inaudible; from sound artists to architectural theorists all are becoming involved with an inter-disciplinary practice that has yet to fully investigated.

Binaural Media decided to commission a wide set of interviews with the aim of creating a contemporary overview of both the artists and their work. Many of these interviews are ongoing and Binaural Media though it important to make these texts available as they grow, so that hopefully the interviews link and learn from each other and develop into a variable resource for both those how are simply interesting in finding out more about the artists working in environmental sound, to those who wish to develop and deepen their understanding and practice.

By asking questions we are trying to move away from the untestable world of intuition of unspoken trial and error, to a create a dialogue where both listeners and composers can utilise some of the many techniques for listening that have long been available for written music. This survey hopes to develop into a comprehensive and open-ended meditation on the sounds that surround us and how the individuals that work with these sounds are creating their own rules, grammar and vocabulary.

#1

interviews with:

Chris Watson
Yannick Dauby
Derek Holzer
Julian Weaver
Francisco Lopéz
Marc behrens



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interview
with **Chris Watson**

CHRIS WATSON Is a sound recordist who specialises in documenting the sounds of animals and their habitats around the world. He was a member of both Cabaret Voltaire and The Hafler Trio in the seventies and eighties. He has worked for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds as well extensively in film, television and radio. From the middle of the nineties he began to release CDs based on pure environmental recordings on the Touch label. These albums [Stepping into the Dark, Outside the Circle of Fire and most recently Weather Report] have become touchstones in the world of field recording as examples of the sensitivity and passion needed to create these amazing recordings. When he isn't travelling he lives near Newcastle in England. Brief history profile

1972 to 1981: Cabaret Voltaire

1981 to 1984: Tyne tees television; sound recordist and founder member of The Hafler Trio

1985 to 1987: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; sound recordist and Hafler Trio projects

1987 to 1993: freelance sound recordist

1994 to present: partner with Hoi Polloi Film & Video

'Stepping into The Dark' won an Award of Distinction at the Prix ARS Electronica Festival

'The Life of Birds' for BBC TV - BAFTA Award for Best Factual Sound

Mark: I was wondering how being a professional listener has effected the way you hear day to day sounds?

Chris: You mean when I'm not recording, how do I react to everyday sounds?

Mark: That's right.

Chris: I find it very difficult to switch off in that sense, I was just talking to my kids about this the other day. I am bothered and effected a lot by noise pollution. But when I'm out recording I can be very very selective about what I choose to listen to and record and how I deal with it, but I find it interferes, noise in particular interferes with my daily life. I do find it quite a problem even psychologically, if I try to switch off it tends to focus my attention more on the things I don't want to hear at that particular moment. So I am bothered by traffic noise and electronic Muzak and distorted sounds and sounds in the wrong place, which is my very general description for noise. It does annoy me and it can effect my mood, because I use sound so much as a thing to react to and to sound off to. And even when I'm out shopping I'm listening and enjoying some sounds, but I can easily be frustrated by others.

Mark: But is it more that the environment is overloaded with sounds in the wrong place?

Chris: Well say when I'm at home I like to do all the domestic stuff, because I'm married and I've got three kids and Maggie my partner works full time, when I'm at home I take over all the domestic stuff.



So when I go shopping or when I'm ironing or something like that I think a lot. I spend a lot of time thinking about projects and how I'm going to apply myself to different recordings or how the next time I go somewhere of for a particular project or how I'm going to steer it. I've got a little workspace upstairs in the loft where I do all my post production and I quite often, during the day, when I'm not away doing recording, I'm at home and I'll have projects on the boil up there and spend a couple of hours and then come down and get a meal ready or something, but I'll think about what I'm doing a lot, it's not that I'm obsessive about it, but I think about it a lot, and that's when sounds, other sounds can intrude and distract me and really piss me off, especially if I'm not in control of that environment. It's fine when I'm at home, but when I go out shopping or doing something outside then, even conversations or something, I find it very difficult not to just tune in and then I start to loose my thread about stuff and then get even more frustrated. So it can be quite pernicious, it's very invasive.

I think that's why I like putting headphones on I enjoy that world that we enter when we put a decent pair of my favourite headphones on that I know the sound of and you hear the result of microphone placement and all the set up and all the field craft and it works and you hear sounds sometimes as you imagined them or even when I'm surprised by them or by a particular acoustic and I really enjoy that. And I guess maybe it's that, I haven't really thought about it actually, maybe it's when you don't have headphones on your not in control of what you're hearing or what you're listening to, or what's being sort of pumped out at you.

Mark: Well some Field Recording CDs are so quiet in places that you have to listen to them on headphones if you live in a city, just to block out the traffic sounds. When I try and listen on speakers to some music passing buses sound about ten times louder than the CD I'm trying to listen to..

Chris: It breaks that sort of surface tension, it not only interacts it can also wipe things out I feel. It's a good point.

Mark: I wanted to get you opinion on people who are working with field recordings in their mainly computer driven compositions. Your experience seems to be very non interventional - you set up microphones and then you move away from the situation to avoid influencing the recording. The computer driven method seems to be that sounds are collected only so that they may be processed by the computer. I wondered what your thoughts were on that, because I get the impression that 'Outside the Circle of Fire' and 'Stepping into the Dark' was created by editing down lots of material, rather than processing sounds recorded.

Chris: That's certainly right. With 'Stepping into the Dark' the whole creative process, if that's what it is how you'd describe it, was my very very careful selection from much longer sequences, so it was framing particular sounds in order to illustrate the point or the essence that I thought was represented in that place from those sounds without any sort of change or manipulation at all. And to compliment that 'Outside the Circle of Fire' was elements of the detail from a lot of those places. The key, almost like the brushstrokes which go to make up the overall sense of place, the overall sense, but then again without. what I wanted to do was to introduce a microphone into a place where we don't normally access, certainly not with our ears and be able to extract information without changing it and then really to present it as cleanly as I could, because I thought, rather like the atmosphere, it embodied that powerful sense of place, that I thought and I know other people have in lots of locations around the world. And I thought by processing that, it would just destroy it. Because a lot of processing, all it



Mark: And would I be right in thinking your latest release 'Weather Report' is more composed?

Chris: Completely, yes. It was a big change for me and it was something I'd thought a lot about. And what I wanted to do with that was to represent my own feelings and experiences of those places, the sounds and the musicality of those places, because a lot of places do have a real rhythm and timbre and a particular acoustic that is to my ears musical I wanted to represent that as best I could, because I knew I wanted to use a time compression, I was interested in how the sound of a place changes with time and how powerful and dramatic that is. Clearly you stand in the place in real time, but with repeated visits to all those locations on Weather Report, fortunately I've been back to those locations a lot over a few years in most cases I got a very strong idea of what the sounds were like and also the thing that suddenly struck me was the thing that controlled how a place sounds was the elements, the weather. The only way to do that was to use real recordings, but to compress the time during which you heard them to represent that idea of not only sense of place, but sense of change as well, and how things can go from black to white very quickly. Does that make sense?

Mark: Is that something like a dawn chorus which starts with certain creatures and ends with something else. where if that last an hour in real time, you might edit it so that it lasts ten minutes?

Chris: Exactly, and I've done exactly that. I did it for a radio program last year, where I recorded a series of dawn choruses from one place and then I compressed that into something like a twelve minute sequence.

And it's maybe because that's how our ears best appreciate or can best tune into sounds of a place like that, because we have such relative and particularly on any commercial media, short attention spans, something like that works. but it also highlights the changes as well and that was something I was really interested in showing and developing. i mean just to see if it worked, you know. And I think it does I've tried it in a few places and it seems to be quite a powerful and creative technique, because it's very subjective when you can, well everybody would come out with a different version, so it's very personal in that sense. Once you've experienced those sounds individually, what I like to think is that you can convey that sense of spirit and change in a piece without adding anything else to it. And I'm constantly amazed by that change of sounds in one place. This project I've just been doing in Liverpool, a couple of soundscapes. One in the city and one in the suburbs in a place called Sefton park and I've done exactly the same thing there, compressing a nine hour period from 3 p.m. until midnight into a forty five minute piece. And it's remarkable you know just making a series of recordings across that time scale, listening to them, becoming very familiar with not only the place and the integrity of the sounds, but also how they do change and then compressing that into your version of it.

Mark: And when you compress time, do you stick to linear time? So sounds that occurred after each other are still kept in that order.



Chris: Yes, very much so. It's quite simplistic in that sense, that compositional sense. It's based on all the ones that I've done. I've done quite a few now. It's simply that, It's my experience of the sounds of that place and it is linear. I normally draw up, not so much a storyboard, but a timeline, and I cut and paste things, first of all on paper and then audio events into a timeline and fit them in that way and that's the compositional process.

Mark: And what about blending and cross fading? How do you work that into your technique, I know it's a very general question.

Chris: well again it's to do with any particular place and what's there and that tends to suggest itself. On the track I did on the Masai Mara where things happen quickly there's so quite swift edits. The sun rises very quickly there, it's just two or three minutes for the sun to break the horizon, unlike say forty minutes here in our northern latitude. So, I tend to go, without wanting to sound cliched, the natural pace of things and sometimes things suggest themselves to me, to maybe be cut more sharply. But a lot of the wild tracks, the foundation tracks, the atmospheres can have very long mix through times on them, because I like creating that seamless drift upon which you can then superimpose particular features and elements. So there's no magic formula in that sense, it's quite a simple process, but nevertheless, for me anyway, it's effective. Another very interesting thing that I've found out simply by doing this is a technique of layering atmospheres. So for instance when I was up near Glen Affric where I recorded all the tracks for the Highlands on Weather Report, I made lots of long recordings there. Because one of the things that I like is setting up a recording system up and leaving it, sometimes on long cables, sometimes a hundred, a hundred and fifty metres and recording for long periods, because I like those spontaneous events which occur within a particular place. And then say by having a recordings of an hour long, it's then interesting to, and this is something I talked to Phill Niblock about, a guy on Touch, and it's a technique he uses for his music, when it then parallels lots of from, in my case, the same location. And quite often that creates what I'd describe as like a musicality, almost like a chord or more than one note when they are layered together, you can really hear that essence of a place.

Mark: So say if you made eight hours of recording, you'd just layer up eight tracks of an hour long each. Is that what you mean?

Chris: Yeah, that's right. And I was amazed, I didn't normally do it for that length of time. But I was amazed that it doesn't so much change the characteristic, but there are certain sounds that get amplified or reinforced simply but that layering process, whereas the atmosphere will remain the same. You can fine tweak it by level controls and I also do some filtering as well, sometimes some quite extreme filtering within the audio spectrum and again when they are combined that sort of highlights it. For me I always have this strong place memory with sounds I guess like we all do and all of a sudden it will just jump out of the speaker, that was the sound of that place and there the ones that I like to use, and by doing that layering technique I've found that that's one powerful way of bringing them out. The best way I can describe it is it's like a musical chord or a series of notes which characterise any location.

Mark: Maybe we can go back a bit to when you mentioned listening on headphones. I was wondering what you think of the deep listening or immersive ethos of listening that people such as Pauline Oliveros and Franscico Lopez adopt? Is it something that you've started to move away from by



starting to time compress your work?

Chris: Well that's interesting. I find that technique that Francisco uses incredibly powerful and moving, but powerful to the point where I find it awesome and it becomes quite a physical experience. When I listen to stuff I don't usually distract myself with any sort of visual stimulus. But say something like Lopez's release La Selva is just incredible.

Mark: I think that is extreme layering and it's so powerful because city dwellers usually have this romantic idea about the tranquillity of nature and La Selva sounds like hell on earth, because all the creatures of rain forest sound like they are screaming all day and all night.

Chris: The point about it is though, and I've worked a lot in the Tropics is that all we hear is quite a narrow band of our audio range. And a lot of the invertebrates in particular, we're just hearing the bottom, the lower end harmonics. Their actual sound spectrum extends way up into the ultra sonic. But we actually just by natural selection just hearing quiet a short bandwidth. I've been doing a lot of insect recordings this year for a film project, a lot of grasshoppers and again we just hear the bottom end, god know what it would be like if we heard all of it. It's be like Phase 4 that film, I don't think we'd able to cope with the overload of it.

Mark: Are there any scientific devices or microphones that can transpose these ultrasonics into the audible bandwidth? I know there's some gadget you can buy for hearing the high frequency sounds that bats make.

Chris: There's quite a few techniques. There's a very interesting technique that scientists are using at the moment which is real time frequency shifting. You can get something which is like a demodulator which is sort of a bat detector, which picks up the ultrasonic echo location call of the bat and some insects and just modulates them down into our audio spectrum. There's another application which I'd really love to try out, which I've not let come across, I've not let had the access to, where these high frequency sounds are time expanded in real time, and so apparently it's a much more accurate representation of what the sound is like and I'd love to hear or experience some of that.

Mark: It that similar to bird song. I read somewhere because bird's have a higher heart rate and a shorter life span that there songs are faster that if they had a similar heart rate to humans. So I think some scientists tried to slow down some bird songs to analyse them.

Chris: To a degree, I think what you might be referring to is something again I'm really looking forward to get a chance to work with and that's the temporal resolution. And you're right the classic example of that is birdsong. In our garden here today there was a wren singing, that very rapid trilling. A wren can produce sixty four separate notes in eight seconds. Now our ear-brain relationship resolves that as a sort of swirling blur of notes. But apparently the current theories are that birds, as you say, because they live their lives faster and although we can see them and exist alongside them, in fact, they exist in a completely parallel but different time range. So their temporal resolution is much much faster than ours. So they don't hear sixty four notes in eight seconds as a blur of notes. Birds can apparently, and I don't know how they worked this out, can apparently resolve all those individual notes and can hear all the tiny changes and even the gaps between the notes to make sense of what the bird is singing about, which is about its sexual status and its defence of territory, and where it is



fittest to reproduce. An astonishing amount of information in eight seconds.

Mark: And do audio recordings contain all that information?

Chris: I think so, maybe it does. But the thing is, I can't see that we could ever resolve the information and I also hope that we would never either, I really enjoy that sense of not knowing. It's all rather crude techniques that have to try to tie everything down and refine it and explain it away. I would imagine even if we can do it with bird song, when it comes to the higher animals, mammals we've not even close. I worked with a marine biologist from sea mammal research unit at St. Andrews called Vincent Janik. And he's the guy who discovered that bottle nosed dolphins around the murray firth have individual signature whistles, which are rather akin to names. So a female when she gives birth will repeat a particular whistle which her young dolphin will learn and carry as his or her signature whistle for the rest of their lives, so it's like a name. And I was out with Janik a few years ago using some hydrophones, picking up bursts of echo location, which you know we were talking about bats, dolphins use the same thing for navigating, identifying prey, getting close to it and when they get really close they can also stun and kill the prey by a high powered burst of echo location sounds, ultrasound ruptures the swim bladders of fish. But he was also saying that they communicate using echo location as well in these bursts that are several seconds long. And I said to him, have you ever tried to break this down and examine it. And he said, well the closest equivalent that he could come to was that in one of these bursts of three, four, five seconds of echo location sound there carrying about the same information as in an average paperback book. So he was saying dolphins are communicating at speeds that our fastest computers can't even approach.

Mark: That's mad that we think of dolphins as these whistling clowns.

Chris: I know it's very arrogant. So if you ever get a chance to read any of his work, it'll be interesting to, him along with Ben Wilson who have done all the work on dolphin vocalisation.

Mark: Well I don't think we would have ever strayed into this territory if we'd done the interview by email.... Okay let's get back to some more questions about recording. I read recently that you were involved in some teaching, could you talk a little bit about that?

Chris: I got asked by the Sonic Arts Network to run this course in the summer school at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park for this organisation called COMMA which stands for Contemporary Music Making for Amateurs. So I got asked, they said we've heard your work and were interested, can you come along and talk about it. They were all sorts of people who were interested in using location sounds in particular and introducing that into all aspects of their music whether it was composing using location sounds or creating pure soundscapes or using recorded sound alongside convention instrumentation. There was one guy who just wanted to go out and record a dawn chorus, he was a classically trained cellist, and he just wanted to play outside alongside a dawn chorus and capture the whole thing. I was there with Justin Bennet as well who was doing the site specific installation stuff and wanting to use all sorts of location sound. So I took my kit down, but I'm just keen for people to get out and start listening and then start recording or the other way round. I normally recommend something like a pair of binaural microphones and a mini disc, not that that's the best thing to go for but it's the most cost effective option for decent sound.



Mark: Yeah, I think listening back to your own binaural recordings can be the powerful. You must of noticed the weird hallucinatory experience you get when you listen back in the same place you recorded.

Chris: It can be really disorienting, I like that. In fact I was doing it last week. I was in Liverpool city centre at about eleven o'clock at night recording a load of the people coming out of the bars and pubs for this urban soundscape I was doing. And I thought the last thing I want to do is walk around the centre Liverpool at night with five grand's worth of recording equipment on my shoulder. So I just used a pair of binaural mikes of mine some little DPA mikes and my flash card recorder inside my jacket and I could just wander around and nobody knew what I was doing either. And it's very effective as you know, it worked really well. So if I go to these classes and there's people who don't have any kit at all and want to start. I normally say go to the microphone madness website <> and get a couple of their matches binaural mikes and any decent mini disc recorder with plug in power and your away.

Mark: What's the flash card recorder you were using?

Chris: The one I use is called a Nagra ARES P2 It's just brilliant I got it in april this year. It uses camera memory, so I've a one gig card and 512 meg card. And it records uncompressed audio straight onto the card. Fostex also make one now called the FR2 and Marantz as well. So there's one or two around now. The great thing is, up until now they're all recorded Mp3 audio, but this is completely uncompressed so it's 44 or 48 Khz and 16bit so it's the same as Dat, but there's no moving parts, there's no motor, so I just runs off AA batteries and it'll run for a couple of days like that. It doesn't make a noise it doesn't get hot, it's instant start, the millisecond you touch the record button it's recording so it's really nice to work with. It's been a real revolution for me going over to file based recording. I mean the big advantage for me is I can take the card out of the recorder and stick it straight into the side of my Laptop and drag the files into an application.

Mark: Have you tested the new Nagra in extreme conditions?

Chris: I have, the first place I took it to was La Selva actually which was one hundred percent humidity and I went straight from there to the Mojave desert which was forty four degrees centigrade and zero humidity and it was fine. It worked really well.

Mark: Let's go back a bit. What was the project you were doing in Liverpool?

Chris: That was with some residents in a tower block near Sefton park who had all the tower block refurbished. They're about twenty floors high and there's about five of them and they look out across Sefton park in the suburbs of Liverpool. So most of them can see it but they can't hear it, so I spent a week recording in the park with some of the residents, with binaurals mikes and mini discs and we were in the park until two in the morning some nights.

Mark: Is it going to be presented in the tower block?

Chris: Yeah, They're got this fantastic delivery system that they're devised. also did a parallel one in the city for the people who don't look out over the park, who look out over the skyline of Liverpool. So we've got two parallel soundtracks presenting the same period - from three in the afternoon until



midnight, both running at exactly the same time and we're burning masters onto four channels of a DVD. And FACT which was the commissioning agency, who got me the residency are installing DVD players in the utility space of the roofs of each of the tower blocks and they're buying cable TV modulators and getting the cable TV company to tune everybody's TV, and there's over three hundred residents in these tower blocks, so spare channels will receive these soundtracks. So there's two stereo loops played into two spare cable TV channels. SO you can get in and you put on, I don't know, channel 44 and you get the Sefton park soundtrack, and you put on channel 45 and you get the city and the river soundtrack.

Mark: When is it going to happen?

Chris: I've finished my part of it. They've got to do the mastering and the DVDs in the next few weeks and it's going to be launched, they're going to have quite a big press launch in February. And then it's going to run in the flats for about three months I think. And press launch is going to be interesting That I devised with Alan Dunn the project manager. We are going to set up a space in FACT [the foundation for art and creative technology] based in Liverpool in one of their cinemas with opposing soundtracks, so we are going to fix a four channel rig up at each end of the room, so you can walk into the room and you'll hear the park on one side and the city on the other and you can walk around and do you own mix. But then for the press preview, they've got one of the guys who lives in a top floor flat and they're going to take over his apartment for the day and the press people that are invited up, they are going to be taken up in the lift and one by one they are going to be left in this room, overlooking the view with just sound on the TV. So it's not going to be a group of journalists listening together, you go in on your own, you've got ten minutes fifteen minutes to stand or sit there.

Mark: That's got to be better than twenty journalists together with a glass of wine each.

Chris: Yeah, that's what we thought, they'll hear the soundtrack and see the view at an appropriate time and then they can go to another flat where the soundtrack is set up for the city view. So I was really pleased with that, I thought it was a good project. They really put a lot of effort into it. An I like the idea that is was a bespoke piece for those three hundred people. And I made sure in the post-production, that the eight or so people that made recordings, some of them were quite elderly, they were really keen, we were in town, we recorded all sorts of stuff. made sure that everybody who recorded things has got a piece in it. And I took a lot of advice, because I don't know Liverpool that well, and we had several meetings when I asked the residents what the sort of key elements of sounds were, because some of them can't even get out much and they rarely go into the city. So without being too nostalgic, what were the sounds that they were familiar with, that they could identify different parts of the city. So I went out and recorded those sounds and I've woven those into the piece, again it's a time compression. And A couple of minutes of nothing but that very gentle, but quite rich cityscape where there's nothing very close perspective, it's all sounds that are way off, I did it from the roof of the building and it's quiet immersive even though there's no much happening, but there's all sorts of stuff in there, but it never breaks the surface. And in the piece I let that sound run, before all the clubs and bars turned out and it kicked off a bit.

Mark: I'm guessing that you sustain your living mainly through TV and film work rather than record sales. I want to find out more about how you see the different work you do.



Chris: Well if I could, I'd love to just make my living by just releasing my work on CD. Also I enjoy the performance aspect, the presentations and installations that I do, and some of the talks and lectures that I give. I love that diversity, that's where I learn, by meeting other people. Because it's quite a solitary activity as I'm sure you know. I enjoy that exchange of ideas. I mean, that's why I enjoy doing things like this, because it's two way, and it's something that I benefit from as well. They're always useful learning experiences. What's happened recently is that some of the TV and film producers that I work with have started to take on board a lot more than they did, certainly ten years ago. Some of the ideas, not just my ideas, but they consider sound much more richly in the productions and that's really satisfying and there's some really interesting work coming up in areas that have become quite dry and less interesting, like television films. With things like surround sound people are really starting to have to think about it and I'm really enjoying that. When I'm thinking about doing some location surround sound and then following that up in post production <> that's what I enjoy about working in television, following things through, which is something I have more with the CDs and some of the radio productions I do. I can work very closely with some radio producers or on my own or with Mike and John at Touch and also perhaps some of the few collaborations I've done. I'm not goal oriented, but I like that range and diversity of all the areas I work in. I'd like that to continue.

Notes and links:

Chris Watson
<http://www.chriswatson.net>

Phase IV.
http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1016251-phase_iv/about.php

Vincent Janik, Marine Researcher
<http://biology.st-andrews.ac.uk/gatty/>

Sonic Arts Network
<http://www.sonicartsnetwork.org/>

Yorkshire Sculpture Park
http://www.yssp.co.uk/ix001_flash.htm

Contemporary Music Making for Amateurs
<http://coma.org/>

<http://www.microphonemadness.com>

Touch Record Label
<http://www.touchmusic.org.uk/>

Alan Dunn, foundation for art and creative technology
<http://www.fact.co.uk>

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interview
with **Yannick Dauby**

YANNICK DAUBY is a sound artist from France who has collaborated with Christophe Havard, Michael Northam, Thomas Koner, Alio Die, Wan-Shuen Tsai, the electronic group Pizmo (with Julien Ottavi and Jerome Joy), and the installation group °sone (with Christophe Havard and Hughes Germaine). Yannick has had works released by Mille Plateaux, and/OAR Alluvial Recordings, edition ellipsis, s'agita recordings, BOXmedia, Bremsstrahlung Recordings, Drone Records, Aina Offensive, Aqua/Amplexus, Taalem, Tiramazu, and Les Silence des Sirenes. In 2000, Yannick received an award from the Luigo Russolo Foundation for his work entitled Noophonie. His Master Thesis degree "Shared Soundscapes" problematize the notions of acoustic ecology....

Mark McLaren (MM): How do you feel working with field recording or captured audio differs from the traditional genres of electro-acoustic, concrete or lowercase musics?

Yannick Dauby (YD): Maybe we should begin by defining what is field recording and captured audio. by field recording, we usually understand some activities of recording some sound aspect of the reality. this idea about recording the reality is partly naive : what is recorded is a specific subjective way of listening an environment through a non-neutral technology rather than the reality itself. by captured audio, there is the idea that any kind of audio signal may be memorized, fixed. this is maybe more precise, but include any kind of sound practice based on sound recorders, even musical activities inside a studio for example...

So, maybe we could use the word "phonography" which can refer, by analogy, to the photography. "phonography" would have two kind of meanings : one purely technical ("writing sounds"), the other more based on an artistic process, including aesthetic considerations.

So, finally to answer your question, i would say that i absolutely don't consider that gathering sounds from an environment and to work with them produce another genre, style (such as the concrete, lowercase and so on...) of music. it is something more fluid : a way to be physically involved into some specific location, to be able to focus on the auditory perception of our surroundings, and finally to work both with the semantic (the meaning of sounds) and aesthetic (schaeffer's sound objects) aspects.

While beginning my first sound experiments in my house with tape recorders and especially feedback, I immediately thought to work in real-time with sounds from outside my windows, just to find out what it is to have some kind of technological filter between the world and my hearing. i would say that working with sonic elements from the environments leads to work with perception rather than with the music.



YD: These three tracks are the first part of "Low Valley". I produced this release (thanks to Stephen Fenton, from Editions...) without any conscious intention, nor aesthetic a-priori. But at the end it is a good representation of three kind of sound activities i have : composing with recorded sounds (track 1,2,3), field recording (track 4), improvising with found object (track 5). The three first tracks were composed using sounds coming from field recordings, manipulation of physical materials or even sound synthesis. The origin of these sounds had no importance. The only guide for composing them was what kind of effect they produced when listened. Some analogies between the morphologies of the sounds coming from an insect chorus or the buzzing of high-tension wires, pushed me to make theses elements meet. Sometimes, i was trying to provoke unpredictable accidents just by testing various process, and some other times i was trying to isolate elements, to reduce a recording into an undefined texture. From step to step, each sound was brought to another one, not necessarily in a linear way, leading to the final composition.

MM: All the low valley tracks appear to use a very fast fluttering effect, similar maybe to granular synthesis, to mirror and process frequent particle sounds such as rain or fire or insect noise . Can you explain why you have chosen to use this effect.

YD: I won't say that I chose an effect. I would rather speak about a convergence of some field recordings I collected and of some sounds I found by playing with electro-acoustic devices. I find this particle aspect interesting when listened on loudspeakers. Comparing to playing with dried thistle or listening to cicadas in-field, when you record them close-miked and/or replay them louder, out of context, you almost have the feeling that it is the membrane of the loud-speaker itself that is the sound generator, and not a loudspeaker reproducing a sound...

MM: A lot of the material has a very textural feeling, which seems to be generated by brittle EQing and some processing to create a very present forthright sound. It is also very intermittent and gestural. Explain how you integrated this foreground texture with the more subtle background drones and transitional sounds.

YD: There, you enter in the description of the very specific activity of composing. But I am not able to clearly explain and express how and why I make choices. Unpredictability and unconscious processes are sometimes is more influential than intentions...But probably, i would say for that question, that I am influenced by the spatial configurations that we perceive through acoustic phenomena. When composing with recorded sounds, I am (voluntary !) constrained by the CD and loudspeakers ensemble. In the opposite of field-recording and improvising, I am able, by editing, to give to a sound a place in time, very precisely. What i often try to have is the possibility to build different acoustic spaces into the room where i work (without moving these two loudspeakers !). I am trying to produce layers of sound elements (or sometimes quasi-silences) that will render spatial combinations by contrast or complementary.

MM: In this survey for the binaural media site we are interviewing people with different approaches but there seems to be an overall continuum and sense of community that might be represented under the Phonography list or, if you go to the New media scene, under the Locative Media hat... How do you regard the possibility of collaborative projects in this area of interest?



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YD: It may seem surprising that so many people lose their time for recordings of passing cars, crowds, rivers or even exotic soundscapes. And it may even seem more surprising that these people intend to release these sounds.

Of course, it is not so much surprising: phonography is a way of memorizing sound events. All these publications constitute a great audio library, a kind of scattered and collective memory of our sound world. Audio technologies not only allow to replay our sonic experiences, it allows to share it. Considering this, a community such as phonography.org is a logical consequence of field recording practices. And collaborative projects are a logical extension of the textual exchanges of mailing-list and the publication of cdrs compilations.

MM: Tell us about "Phonographic Migrations", your series of remote projects based on exchanges of field recordings, and the concept of shared soundscapes.... With its notions of transduction, transfer and cooperation based process.

YD: First important point: "Phonographic migrations" is *not mine*. Many people are involved in these projects, and participants can at any point organize another project, invent a new form.

It began with a few people who I was hoping to work with. A small label, Tiramizu, asked me for a release. I decided to propose a way of collaborating with my distant friends Dale Lloyd, Koura, Murmer, Marc Namblard, Michael Northam and Sawako. The easiest way was of course to use the internet. Without any interest in www pages, we built a small hidden working place: just a free webhosting space, with its capacity limits (100 Mo). The aim was to work together, remotely, sharing our field recordings, constructing a kind of collective soundscape. At the deadline, we simply burned the content of the server, used the file names and order for the tracks. This work was entitled "Presque Museifu", a hybrid french-japanese translation of "almost anarchic" (japanese and french were the language of some participants, but we used english to communicate...).

Dale Lloyd is currently producing the second part of this Phonographic Migrations series: a long-duration process during which each participant replays field recordings done by others, into a specific location, and then records the result (the mix and interactions between recorded soundscape and the new acoustic one), and provides it to the community. It is a long chain of inclusions of soundscapes through phonography, that will be also published in CDr by And/OAR.

Derek Holzer and Sarah, the main actors of Phonographic Migration now, have organized, and are still working, on network-based projects related to collaborative phonography and soundscape composition. The SoundscapeFM was an internet and hertzian radio broadcast of randomly mixed field recordings of numerous participants contacted on the web. The webstream is currently off, but the website still provides the different files: www.soundscape-fm.net/

I find the idea of "sharing" stimulating: I would interpret it as the action of dividing a whole into several fragments (to share a piece of cake into parts...) to give access to others (to share some files on the internet...) or to have a common experience (to share someone's happiness). Considering this, you can guess that audio technologies, especially when using its digital and network-related



forms, can easily provide a lot of interesting listening situation when sharing a soundscape... this "shared soundscape" idea was for me a way to avoid the so common interpretations of actual sound works : sampling, mix, ambient, improvisation, etc... All these terms are quite distracting from what is the essential point (in my humble opinion) : actively listening and participating to our sound environment.

In our topic, a 'transfert' could be the direct link of a sound environment into another one : web streaming the signal of a microphone pointed from my window towards the pc speakers of one internet visitor, for example. What i understand with 'transduction' is the idea of transforming a physical value into another one. A microphone transform an air pressure value into electric voltage value. The transducer is an interface into these electric and acoustic worlds and acts as a filter according to its physical specificities. Transduction is also the term used by Simondon for describing the way some practices or knowledge propagates into different social contexts.

About cooperation based process there is so much to say, and so much that has been said...

I would just add that i am not interested in cooperation as a new art-form. I am interested into cooperation for the chaotic elements, indeterminacy that is produced when you can't totally expect someone's else reaction. And also, i have the feeling that cooperation is necessary for avoiding this artistic ivory tower syndrome that you can experience when in front of a computer screen...

I would say that all these arguments are gathered in the game-aspect of the protocols and processes in the Phonographic Migration series. For example, I am currently trying to have some reflections about sound interactions between human and non-human animals, and especially focusing on non-human animal sound recording. I am especially looking for any kind of personal testimony about why and how do people record animals, about special relationships to animal sounds (recorded or not), the use of these recorded sounds, the experiences of musical improvisation involving animals, and so on. If anyone would like to discuss, share an experience or opinion, I'd like to hear from them.

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Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Derek Holzer**

DEREK HOLZER is a sound and radio artist with a background in free radio, net.radio and streaming media technologies. Recently, his work has focused on capturing and transforming small, unnoticed sounds from various natural and urban locations [Karosta Project, w/ Sara Kolster], and on the electromagnetic resonances in our everyday environment [OZONE Project, w/ Bas van Koolwijk], as well as the use of free software such as Linux and Pure-Data.

Mark McLaren (MM): Tell me about the way you perform, specifically about the way you manipulate objects live to create sound?

Derek Holzer (DH): I got into working with sound objects and also with field recording a couple of years ago when I was in a Karosta, Latvia. I spent a very long, cold month of December to January there. Everything was frozen, but everything was so still you could really pull sounds out of the environment--sounds of water and ice. And I started to find things, all kinds of things--a lot of bones actually--and other strange objects, shells, chunks of metal. Things that seemed like they had history behind them, because I was in this place that was steeped in history--the history of the Tsarist era, the history of the Second World War, the history of the Soviet occupation and now the history of this handover to the EU and NATO regime. Everything I picked up seemed significant for some reason, so I began to stroke them and move them around and bang them together and see what kind of sounds would come out. And then I started to build up patches in the computer that would build up textures out of these sounds, and I thought these were very interesting sounds and I liked working with them a lot. At the same time, I was working with a group from Riga called Oloolo, and they came out to Karosta one day. We sat down and recorded this massive three hour jam session where I was working only with these objects and delays and filters and the ways of building up textures that I'd been creating, and they were playing some of their own work. They wound up taking the recordings and producing this album "Kosta", that was released on Nextsound. I kind of forgot about it for a while, and then they wrote me almost a year later saying 'oh, well we produced this album out of this jam and it's going to be released' and so I was really happy about this.

It was really a way of learning how to pick up objects and assess them for their sonic potential. I wound up using a lot of contact microphones, because that is a way to isolate an object from the surrounding acoustics, but I also use a lot of close up miking, dynamic microphones to pick up the sound of them clinking together or the acoustics introduced inside of an object. If you have a shell or a bottle or something like that, I wanted to pick up how it transforms the sound inside of it. I also do a lot of field recording. I work as many people do, with binaural microphones that I wear in my ears so that I become a walking sound receiver, and I use a lot of those recordings as well.

Sometimes I use a lot more of those recordings than I use objects, it really depends on the circumstances. Setting up to do a live show where you're really working with sound objects in this time



honoured electro-acoustic manner actually takes a lot of preparation time, and sometimes you get a gig when you're playing with five other people and they all want their set up time, so you've just got to do something very quickly. But given the time to set up, I like to work in this way--just finding objects from that place. I have some objects which I carry with me, some objects from Karosta and quite a few objects that I picked up during some travels in Brazil from the Amazonas regions, parts of fishes and shells and unidentifiable objects which are quite unique in the way that they look and the way that they sound. So they're my lucky charms, and if I don't find anything interesting in a place I can always pull these out and get something very interesting out of them.

MM: You mention that objects felt significant. Could you elaborate on this point? I notice a lot of works especially, location recording compositions, rely on this significance to almost create a false strength, to use the context as a crutch to composition.

DH: Hmmmm.... that's a loaded question if I ever heard one! To start with, I don't think that referencing signifiers which lay outside the "composition" proper is anything of a crutch. Follow that line of thinking for a while and you end up at the place where people say, "well, who cares as long as it sounds cool". And I've never been comfortable conversing like that. From my first exposures to "experimental music", I was always fascinated with the process of how sounds were arrived at, the kind of thought processes and backgrounds that a work had even if it were not obviously apparent in the composition, and especially what kind of "non-musical" objects were used and how they were treated. In short, I read liner notes like they were poems. This predates any aspirations of actually *making* sound myself in anything more than a self-satisfying, amateur, bedroom sort of way, so I wouldn't even chalk it up to trying to bite anyone's style.

On the other hand, this game of extra-compositional signifiers is exactly that... a game. By this I mean that it's a situation that the listener enters into consensually with the artist. The listener agrees to accept certain elements which aren't coming out of the speakers--textual cues, album art and other packaging or even fragments of the artist's biography--as part of their whole experience of the work. I think this way of listening has deep precedents in the "serious music" world. Listen to classical radio, or open up any established composer's CD notes, and then tell me that the contextual information about each composer provided doesn't frame the listening experience. However, because it's a game, you have to be careful not to strain your credibility, or else the whole suspension of disbelief you have built up in the listener will crash. The Acousmatician would argue that the sounds should stand up by themselves divorced of any reality or source-referent, or even any performative referent in the case of Lopez and co. But even in this case, you are asked to play the suspension game, and accept that the sounds exist as concrete objects disconnected from the world. And once again, you are back to extra-compositional cues which instruct your listening experience.

MM: Do you mean the significance helped you concentrate on playing with the object, or do you feel that there is some way that the historical significance of a place can be transferred to a listener purely by its sound?

DH: In the first place, I draw inspiration from the objects I find, and imagine small stories and sounds hidden inside them, and that, like little tape recorders, these objects have stored up the resonances of their various environments down to the subatomic level. My job then is to coax these resonances out and to make them audible. At times it is a very sonically-motivated approach, but there are times when



it is a very historically-motivated one. For the Karosta recordings, I only used sounds and objects from a very specific location, and so I do think that the historical significance can be transferred to an aware listener. Mark Teppo, of Igloo magazine, wrote of the Oloolo collaboration "Kosta": "This is glitch theory being applied to the sound of history, the winds of old battlefields and abandoned cities being cut, spliced, and flung -- scattershot -- into the air."

MM: You say that you 'build up textures in the computer' is this in relation to a live manipulation or an off-line composition method? Please explain a little about the different approaches you have to improvising and to composing and 'finishing' pieces?

DH: My compositional process begins before I have picked up a single object or even turned on the microphone. I would say that the bulk of my time in the studio is spent building sound-processing tools in Pure Data. I simply don't trust common, commercially available plug-ins simply because I feel like I'm working in some one else's room. They've given me a table to sit at, but I can't move it, and a window to look out, but I can't open it, and a door to walk through, but only in the manner which they prescribe. I would prefer to build up my own tools, and know inside out how they work, rather than diddle with other people's knobs and try out their presets. So the tools I build up create a set of improvisational and compositional possibilities that I can explore once I have brought objects or recordings to the situation.

A great many of these tools involve using delays or buffers to build up layers of sound, often from a microphone input or a recording on disk. I am much more interested in texture than strict rhythm or melody, and so I use my tools as a sonic microscope to isolate small sound particles of and magnify them. I took to an improvisational approach because otherwise I am too much of a perfectionist, and doing studio tracks usually takes much longer than I think it should, especially considering the time I've already spent programming. So I try to document the possibilities I've programmed into my tools, which is where I feel the real compositional work is for me, and then later on I can try to arrange them in a multi-tracker and get all anal-retentive "mastering" them out to highlight the best parts of the sounds I created.

MM: The way you collect sounds interests me. You say you 'bang objects' to bring sounds out of them, you make in-ear binaural recordings. These methods do not seem as neutral as say the classic 'non interventional' field recording style where the microphone is placed and left to record and then edited later. Your style seems more associated with editing and composition whilst you are collecting source material. How do you think your personal intervention into a space or an object effects both the composition and the way the space/ object is represented by your work?

DH: I think most people are aware of the well-known axiom from physics which states that no matter how you observe a phenomenon, your observation has changed it according to the method which you use. We live here in the world, not floating in some academic reverie above it, and I don't believe any approach to recording sounds is "non-interventional". I do quite a bit of "set and hide" recording work as well, but by virtue of the fact that I have chosen the direction to point the mike and when to turn it on, I have already engaged in a compositional decision. Hunting for sounds can be very frustrating exactly because we are looking for something specific in all the noisy chaos.

A case in point: I spent a summer in Brasil, with the intention of collecting "nature sounds". But just



about any place a human being can travel in Brazil is filled up with human noises: diesel engines, airplanes, car stereos, chickens, dogs, children... I got really frustrated with this, and only later realized that it was my discriminating mind which caused this frustration--my own value judgements of what a "good" or "bad" sound was, and my attempts to separate the two. I started to think what some ways out of that trap would be, and came up with the idea of an algorithmic portable recorder. I'll be working on that at STEIM in Amsterdam this spring. It's called PANdev, and is based on a handheld computer which will essentially make the decisions of when to record. All the user need do is just walk around.

But when I do record, yes, I am both very active and very specific about what is recorded. My mike techniques are an extension of my improv techniques, and I hope to extract small, unnoticed resonances from locations and objects. I'm reminded of the soundwalks of Dallas Simpson, where he seems to be taking this "objective" recording stance by just letting the tape run, but in fact he's actively investigating everything he comes across, "interfering" with it to check out its sonic potential. To me, that's honest. I don't want to carry around any academic pretenses of simply "capturing" the acoustic ecology that is out there in some "pure", raw or unadulterated form. This works for other people who have their own reasons for doing it, but I simply don't believe that any sonic environment is unchanged by my stepping into it. So what I try to establish is my own personal relationship to that place based on context, history, and my own perceptions. If anyone else is ready to take that ride with me through my recordings, my hope is that some of that relationship gets through.

MM: Can you explain a bit more about Pure Data and how it differs from other commercial software?

DH: I used a lot of cracked commercial software for a lot of years when doing sound, and I always got a couple of feelings out of it. One feeling was that you get these fancy programs with these fancy user interfaces, but at the end the more they have created this environment that's very easy for you to use, the more they're actually determined the kind of work you can make with it. If you look at a program like Ableton Live, which is used by probably about eighty percent of people making sound and performing out live these days it seems like. It's good for a very few things--it's good for working with loops, putting effects on these loops and sequencing them. But it pushes you in one creative direction, it pushes you into making a certain kind of music. Really it pushes you towards German techno more than anything else!

So I always felt that the more fancy the software looked, the less choices I had. And the second thing that I felt was that when I was using some kind of cracked software, then I was giving away my rights as a user. Because if there was something wrong with the software or I wanted something to be different about it, I had nobody to turn to. Of course, you can't turn to the person who cracked the software because they're invisible, and you can't turn to the company that manufactured the software because, well, you didn't pay for it, so you're really a citizen without rights--a non-entity in the whole thing.

So I started looking for ways around that problem, and I found Pure Data to be a very interesting way of working because when you start up the program, it gives you this big white nothing. It's sort of like Hemingway's white elephant, that white page in the typewriter that confronts you with yourself. You have to bring your own knowledge, your own ideas, what you want and what you think you can do to this software, and then it works for you. It's a bit like learning a language. You start with some vocabulary, you start with some grammar, and maybe the first year you can order beers and say hello to



pretty waitresses, the next year you might be speaking like a small school child, and the year after that maybe you've writing poetry. Who knows? It's this kind of way of working that's building up on a language of metaphor, the same way that a tradition musician would start off by playing “do-re-mi”, and eventually would be writing sonatas or whatever. So I like this approach very much, it's building up from nothing that is pre-determined. Free software in general attracts me, because I teach and I share a lot, and I don't won't any barriers between what I have to say, what I have to show, what I have to share and the people that I want to share all these things with. So the only way I've found to do that properly is by using things like free software that have open licenses where, not only the content is free to share, but the means of producing the content is also free and easily shareable.

links:

DEREK HOLZER
www.umatic.nl

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Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Julian Weaver**

RESPIRER

JULIAN WEAVER's installation **RESPIRER** uses the medical practice of Auscultation (the practice of listening to sounds arising from within the organs) to play with the expectations of an audience submitting to a clinical frameworks within an art context. With a nurse employed to take down details and perform an examination, this situation provides a strange and disconcerting feeling that though we are in an art environment, the medical world and its rules prevail. So as soon as the examination is complete, there is an expectation of a diagnosis, to know that we are healthy. The disappointment of not receiving any reassurance is one of the more powerful aspects of this piece. The examination finished, you are asked to leave the enclosed space of the installation and move back into the gallery. Weaver explains that he is both interested in collecting lung sounds, as well as observing the participants suspending their aesthetic critique "in favour of physical analysis [that] suggests an investment in the beneficence of the medical institution as a whole. A view not entirely consonant with a socio-political view of the health service. This fallout between belief in the medical profession and its institutionalisation is underpinned by a differentiation between the political and the clinical; something that provides the clinical with a freedom not enjoyed in the political."

It some ways Respirer reflects the very invention of the Stethoscope itself. A young French physician called Laennec was examining a patient in 1816. Apparently the doctor was both embarrassed to place his ear onto female patients chests and also slightly squeamish of the sick and the epidemic of tuberculosis that he was employed to treat. In a flash of inspiration he remembered that "we hear the scratch of a pin at one end of a piece of wood, on applying the ear to the other." Making a paper cone he placed the large end on the patients chest and the other end at his ear. He was "not a little surprised and pleased, to find that I could thereby perceive the action of the heart in a manner much more clear and distinct than I had ever been able to do by the immediate application of the ear." Something of this moment remains in Respirer, the disgust and closure of the patient; the separateness of the artwork from the experience of taking part; the depository for collecting sounds without diagnoses. And of course the problems of diagnosis itself. Weaver informs me that though he would not want to, it would be illegal for even a registered medical practitioner to diagnose patients in a gallery.

It is true lung sounds are very evocative and full of the hidden interior of the body. Spaces usually too intimate even to examine ourselves. But they are also limited and hard to define. Weaver states that "Like other mechanisms (the car, the record, a water tap, etc), when in good condition, the lungs produce only a repetitive 'whooshing'. When damaged, however, there are a limited number of additional sounds that can be identified. These range, pathologically speaking, from the muffling of the common cold due to temporary consolidation of the lung cavity or the 'crackling' of the alveoli associated with asthma to the terminal gurgling of the 'death rattle' as the lungs slowly fill with fluid." Weaver examines the problems current even in contemporary medical practice where, wax in doctors ears and many other factors render auscultation a questionable practice it terms of locating illness. What we find here is a clever reading of both the effects of modern art's tradition method of negation coupled with critical questioning of the acceptance of institutional medical wisdom.



Mark McLaren (MM): Explain the version of Respirer that I saw in Tallin as part of the Isea2004 festival.

Julian Weaver (JW): The version of the installation of Respirer at Isea is a lung recording clinic, which you fill in a form and receive an examination from a nurse. the sound is routed out to a speaker and people who are outside can both watch the examination that is taking place and listen to the lung sounds coming out through the stethoscope.

MM: What reactions have you found from the people who take part, considering the clinical structure of the piece?

JW: Well it seems the people are readily available to submit themselves to the examination without really asking any questions about say, the validity of the nurse who's doing the examination. And they seem quite often to forget that it's a piece of art and become far more interested in their own health which is quiet peculiar.

MM: The installation seems to use to methods of disappointment. Firstly the fact that you don't receive a diagnosis and secondly that the person who is being examining cannot really hear their own lung sounds. Is this an intentional part of the piece.

JW: Well it started off with thinking about the levels by which people who are trained to auscultate actually hear any sound at all. There's a huge gap between the amount of sound that's left by the time it reaches the stethoscope from its point of original in the lung. And quite often there's a lot of extraneous noise to do with the handling of the stethoscope and various other physical attributes like cleanliness of the physician's ears. So there's a possible absence of sound coming through so there's this identification process in the stethoscope where the physician is attempting to discern between a framed noise, a noise that has a clinical definition and other extraneous noise. So going back to the question of disdain for the audience it's not really to do with stopping people listening to the sounds, because they're not going to be hearing them anyway in a normal situation when you go to the doctor. The Doctor doesn't invite you to listen to the sound yourself, it a pure clinical procedure that they are occupying.

MM: Are you planning to make any work with the depository of lung sounds that you have collected?

JW: The initial purpose of Respirer was just a sound work, it wasn't an installation as such. It was recordings I'd taken from other places and mixed together, where you wouldn't be able to distinguish between one persons breathing and other. And returning back to the diagnostics again, there's almost like a demographic of people from the installation which is designed to pick up, to get more people in to get there lungs recorded for more source material, and the diagnostics would be sort of further removed be the collapse of the all the different recordings by actually mixing them all down into one piece so you almost get like one demographic of visitors to the show. So for each show that's happened there's been a piece which I guess is a sort of cartophony of visitors, and audio map of people who've arrived in the gallery.

MM: I noticed that the more ill people are, the more interesting their lung sounds are. Is this drawing you to work with more obviously sick people in order to get less bland lung sounds?



JW: Well, as I remade the installation each time, it's become clearer that it's not entirely - the sound was the initial interest for me, or the origin of the sound - I read in an american medical journal and they were still arguing about the source for certain lung sounds were and no one could actually determine the origin, which was quite interesting to me that sounds were being produced but no one could actually identify the source -..... it became more about the framework within which the technique of listening in a clinical way has a very historical and fixed framework but it's layered in top of a series of unknown quantities, I think now it's more to do with now exploring the relation of medical listening to noise and how it organises into a logical framework linguistic system.



Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Francisco López**

FRANCISCO LÓPEZ is internationally recognized in the underground experimental music scene. Over the last twenty five years he has developed an absolutely personal sound world, based on profound listening. He has realized hundreds of concerts, projects with field recordings, and sound installations around the world. His extended catalogue of sound pieces has been released by more than 140 record labels worldwide, and he has twice been awarded honorary mentions at the competition of Ars Electronica Festival.

Mark McLaren (MM): You make a lot of live performances. Can you explain about some of the problems you are having by trying to reduce the role of the performer / pop star and place emphasis on the experience of deep listening?

Francisco López (FL): The main problem for me is to overcome the traditional set up for music performance, with a stage, frontal sound and the audience thus contemplating the performance. One of my primary goals is to create a situation in which the audience is immersed into the sound matter instead of just listening to it. In addition to this, I see the contemplation of the music realization (through either traditional or electronic instruments) as a dissipative agent acting on the potential of sound alone. That's why I do all my performances in complete darkness, providing blindfolds, and with a surround system around the audience, which I control from the center of the space. It's essential for me to try to become invisible as a performer and to hide the technological tools I use away from the attention of the audience. The role of the performer as a stage character and that of the tools as stage 'props' are thus reduced. However, the role of both as generators of the sonic experience is vividly present and felt in it. With all this I'm trying to reveal hidden phenomenological layers of sonic essence that are normally obscured by both the stage and the instrumental paradigms.

MM: How did working on La Selva influence your relationship to supposed opposites of city and natural sounds?

FL: When sounds (recorded or not) are sounds, and not representations of things, everything changes in terms of our apprehension of this aspect of 'reality'. With representation in mind, some insects sound like electronic devices and some machines could sound like a waterfall. As sounds, we have very few words to describe these perceptual entities (instead of their sources), as Pierre Schaeffer and others have been insistently pointing out without much success in changing widespread misconceptions about what sounds actually are. Keeping this in mind, I don't perceive opposites in categorical groups such as 'city' and 'natural' sounds, for example, since we could say there are no such things.



MM: Can you explain a little about the way you compose? What are you doing beyond intuition?

FL: I would say there's very little beyond intuition. Which is a way of saying that I consider intuition, spirit, personal substance, or whatever we want to call that, to be the most fundamental aspect for composition (as for cooking or drawing, for that matter). What I would call technical aspects of composition can shed light on structural or superficial features of the sound creations but it is my belief that they reveal very little of their real substance and quality. I work with sound doing my own environmental recordings and then treating them (or not) through all kinds of processing tools (both analog and digital), which, as such, is a way of working that thousands of other people worldwide share as well.

MM: Why do you think Galleries and institutions are reluctant to purchase and exhibition sound art that has no visual content ? [for example when the whitney gallery in new york purchased Vitiello's WTC recordings it was the first sound piece they had purchased for 30 years]

FL: I think this has to do with keeping very traditionalist stereotypes on what the places and the values of visual and sonic creations are, as well as the contexts to where they belong. Sound alone is not perceived as something that can be exhibited, purchased or sold in an art context. Most visual artists and curators consider sound as an addition or just one more element -typically a background- of the 'piece' (should a painting be considered incomplete because it has no sound?). It's also interesting (and many times amusing) to notice that many visual art people with seemingly 'radical' conceptions on what art is have quite mainstream musical interests or conceptions on what music is.

MM: Explain to me how you think you have developed your characteristic sound. What were the musics that you were listening to in the eighties that affected you, what led you to become involved in music?

FL: I do listen to a lot of different music, from "experimental" to jazz, film soundtracks, ethnic music, bossa nova, grindcore... Like many other people, I believe all these things have an influence on the way I do things when it comes to the work with sound. However, I think in my personal experience listening to the "real world" (doing lots of field recordings, working with them) -particularly natural sound environments- has actually been the main influence in terms of expanding textural and structural possibilities. The amplitude of dynamics, frequency spectrum, timbre variety, temporal pace, and many other sound features, in that "real world" is just astonishing and a source of endless inspiration for me. I've learnt more from that ongoing experience than from any music. It has shown me a lot about how restricted are the usual standards in most music and has given me the inspiration and the courage to explore other territories of sound creation. A lot of people wrongly perceive these territories (particularly those where there's an extreme subtlety) as something "conceptual", when in fact they're reflections of very natural, common things.

MM: Your statement about performance seems very involved with an immersive of experience in sound. Is this any way related to the theories of Deep Listening? And on the other hand do you place much value in 'shallow listening', where music is based around other maybe more domestic activities such as reading or washing or talking?

FL: There is a long history of deep, profound, dedicated modes of listening to sound and music, from religious experiences to technical situations. Without having a specific religious goal, I have a strong



interest and commitment in creating a live experience that becomes a intensely spiritual and transformative experience. This is actually what I look for in the work of other artists, both with sound and with other means. I have very little interest in creating or attending a performance to just listen to music. There are of course some cases in which this is alright, I'm not despising any other form of music performance that doesn't attain (or has no intention of attaining) that level of "intensity". But my interest is definitely in the direction of a very demanding, very intense live experience, and I certainly believe that in most music there is way more of the first than the latter. Concerning any form of "shallow listening" (like the traditional concept of ambient music), of course this happens all the time and we all do it sometimes, but this is like having a delicious meal and just not putting any attention to the food: it's just a shame.

MM: You seem happy to work using intuition. How do you feel the group of musicians working with processed field recording can develop if people don't try to establish a written vocabulary of process and methodology that tries to distance itself from its roots both in post-techno and academic genres?

FL: I really think that developing a vocabulary of process and methodology for this kind of work with processed field recordings (or any other with sound, for that matter) doesn't help at all to make the work any better or any more interesting or any more developed. To me, the whole historical academic experience (and the popular version of it through magazines in techno and popular music) is a proof of the complete uselessness of such attempts. The reason for this, I believe, is in the fact that a translation into language of aural entities and processes always proves to be a poor -and unnecessary- version of these phenomena, which we can indeed present, perceive and deal with as they are. Because of the experience with the work with sound (both mine and that of other artists) I can't help but seeing these attempts at categorizing and verbalizing as a futile waste of time, really. The best way to "develop" is to actually do work, and a lot of people are actually doing it. I think it was Pollock who said that the best critique of a painting is to put another painting next to it.

MM: You mention trying to approach a religious experience in terms of creating a deep listening environment to perform in. What experiences have you had with sound becoming transcendent or mystic? Can you see a connection between this secular intensity and Werner Herzog's idea of ecstatic landscapes.

FL: Ecstasy can indeed be one of the manifestations of a transcendent experience but there are others, with different degrees of intensity and with diverse descriptions by different people, that are hardly communicable in a precise way. I grew up in a big city but spent all summers in a small town in the countryside. Both worlds provided ample opportunity of prolonged experiences for a committed solitary listener like me. For reasons unknown to me, I've always been attracted by human-devoid sonic environments, and solitude has been for me a necessary condition for anything close to a transcendent experience. Surprisingly enough, you can have such an experience in the most unlikely or unexpected situations, like just laying down on a forest floor or listening to a piece of repetitive machinery. There have been, however, a few experiences that caused a large-scale impact in my perception of sonic matter, giving rise at times to something I could consider as a transcendent experience. That was the case during my work in the Cost Rican rain forest, a truly acousmatic world where a myriad things can be heard and almost nothing can be seen.



MM: I understand the need to defend music from journalism and that music by its very nature contains information that cannot be transferred into language. But surely there must be something that is worth saying about the methods you employ to create and think about your music.

FL: To me, it's not so much that these things cannot be translated into language (some things can). I make an emphasis in not revealing technical or compositional aspects of the work because I believe this has a dissipative effect on the perception of the actual work created. I work through a long and elaborated process of mutation of the sound materials, that is closer to evolution (with a common stem, with diversification, and with the apparition of new sonic "species") than to anything else. I'm obsessed with precision, nuance, and detail, both in the features of the sound materials and in the structural and perceptual aspects of the work, including the sense of virtual space in the pieces and the pace of sonic events. All of this requires extensive studio work and places me far away from any interest in improvisation, for example.

MM: Can you give me any specific examples of how "real world" sounds have been 'astonishing and a source of endless inspiration' for yourself.

FL: A cyclone in the rain forest. Wind in Patagonia. A bumblebee close to the microphone. A computer room controlling switches in a large apartment building. A close up recording of a fireplace. A choir of frogs. A moving flag pole through a contact microphone... but you'd have to hear the actual sounds!

links:

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Survey on Location and context based media

#1 [winter2006]

conducted by Mark McLaren

interview
with **Marc Behrens**

MARK BEHRENS is a sound artist working in performance, installation, audio and video. He has performed extensively across Europe, Japan, Middle East and North America. He is known for creating delicate work using building interiors, processed field recordings and manipulated objects.

Selected Discography:

Advanced Environmental Control [trente oiseaux]
Four Installations [trente oiseaux]
Further Consequences, with Paulo Raposo [cronica]
A Szellem Alma, with Francisco Lopez [absolute]

Mark McLaren (MM): How do you think composing with and listening to field recordings affects the non linguistic and non narrative nature of instrumental music?

Marc Behrens (MB): From my point of view, I do not call music composed with field recordings instrumental music. It is concrete music. Whether or not it does have a narrative structure is subject to the composer's decision. There are examples of both. Most Musique Concrète is highly narrative, and often it contains (in its later phase, also very much pursued by the Canadian school) linguistic (i.e. speech) elements.

On the other hand, working with field recordings can, in some cases, lead to a music arranged not so much with a destination in time, but rather in the form of a 'plateau' of time. Here, the sound material is similar, or, say of similar intensity, in many points within the composition - just like a given field recording itself.

Field recordings may be not linguistic, but they are pre-linguistic, since they contain information about the sonic aspects of a place that is not encoded into language, nevertheless audibly understandable for those not present at the moment of the actual recording. The composer who uses these field recordings works with them in his own way, based on his own language -however rudimentary it might be-, thus on a meta-level linguistic structures are involved. But also something else comes into effect, working with field recordings: as the recordist /composer is in the grasp of the moment of the actual recorded sound, and whatever happens in this moment, and he later reminds this when re-listening to the recording, the situation and sound may put their own structure upon his imagination and invoke feelings that lead to certain decisions within the composition. It can go so far as that structures within field recordings are already 'auto-composed', not language-based at all, but they gain linguistic sense depending on the imagination and associative capabilities of the listener.



MM: One of the reasons for these interviews is to see if there is an 'grammar of composition' emerging from different practitioners. Have you evolved any compositional rules or do you solely work on intuition?

MB: I would rather call them 'methods', when referring to the general atmosphere of a piece, or 'library of forms' (plus, in fact, 'grammar'), when referring to microstructures and single events in the composition. Unfortunately this library and grammar so far exists solely in my mind. I should really make an attempt to write them down, which is not a quickly done project I guess. In short I can say that I favour a rather fragmented approach over the 'drone' approach, that lets me rework the original recordings not only into something that sounds different in terms of pitch, timbre, frequency spectrum, but also into something more atomic, like single strokes on an instrument for example. In this way, I am more or less returning to instrumental music. I have understood that I have a preference for certain volume curves over others when I shape sounds. Some of these forms are returning often in several different compositions - they do have to correspond to my 'tests'. These tests check proportions (time/volume) as well as dynamics in a piece.

I usually start with the shaping of the basic sound material (field recordings, recordings of played objects), from there I develop a general idea about the overall structure and dynamics of a piece. Then the meticulous putting into action of that mental library starts.

There is something like a 'typical' sound, which stems largely from the methods, i.e. the way I rework field recordings. This, I mean the shaping of samples made from the field recordings, has been compared with building one's own instruments. But in fact it is the first instance of the composition itself, especially when you work with cues coming from the original material.

MM: So it seems as if there are almost two levels of composition becoming apparent: Firstly the proto-composition of editing and playing an environment whilst recording; Secondly the composition which takes places after the 'raw material' is returned to the studio. Would you like to talk about the similarities between improvising in performance / composition and improvising during making field recordings, this seems an unexplored area of creativity?

MB: To this question I see two possible answers, the first one being very simple: if improvisation during field recording sessions is used to create sonic basic material for composition or to influence a given sonic event, then it is not relevant if it was improvisation, since later the material is composed with non-improvisational rules. At least I am able to say that for my own compositions. And this renders that kind of improvisation completely different from 'classical' improvisation.

The second answer is maybe more complex: I didn't regard the element of 'improvisation' during field recording as being at all important or crucial to the composition processes, I must admit. Interesting that you would mention it. I do make a rough distinction between field recordings as such, and played objects. But of course, if you 'direct' a field recording in a specific way, by trying out to play some objects within reach for example, you could call that improvisation. The question is, if the results from these actions remain untouched and presented as a block later (in which the improv element is clear) or if you deconstruct them and work with them in ways we have described earlier in this interview (more towards reflected composition). I do recall one of the rare cases in which I used a long 'uncensored' passage from a recording in a train station that was done with piezos on a baggage cart (so you



As you mentioned, the similarities are clear, but I must say that improvisation in these cases follows exclusively the approach of the experiment, which makes it in my humble opinion unequal to instrumental improvisation since the latter is always counting on the musician's mastery of the instrument. Let's stick to improvisation-while-field-recording since improvisation while performing still is 'instrumental' in a way. During field recording one tries to influence a given soundscape and quite typically relies on post-production sound design, so one tends to do many takes and later edit them instead of really 'playing' a continuous block (again - this is just my approach). I should mention that I increasingly got frustrated with this approach, or rather with the fact that I got so influenced by the non-simultaneity of thinking in the age of computer-manipulated concrete sound. So remembering this, the field recording process - when using improvisation - is a process of experiments that help to generate the vision of a music piece.

What just now comes to my mind is also the fact that instrumental improvisation (whatever the instrument is like - including computers) in a group always has linguistic aspects. Maybe we should come back to that that later, if we return to that point.

(to be continued)

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