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SOUNDS

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THE LANGUAGE OF SOUNDS^a

(DIE SPRACHE DER GERÄUSCHE)

ESSAY BY JANKO HANUSHEVSKY

THE FIRST SOUND IN THE MORNING: my alarm clock. An early digital clock, finest 80s design, cubic, with an integrated mono loudspeaker on the top.

I haven't been able to receive a single radio station without interferences for years. The day rushes into my dreams crunching and crackling. In addition my radio seems to shift frequencies all by itself. One morning it wakes me up with the sonorous voice of a news anchor on national broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk*, the next morning with country music or dub-reggae beats.

Out there in the world, my alarm clock is ringing. A real sound event in the physical world outside myself. The pigeon on the roof hears it through my open window. So do the swifts and swallows that are already plowing the airspace above me for the mosquitoes of the morning.

^a I decided to use the word "sound" to translate the German term "*Geräusch*" in favor of the term noise, since the latter has a light negative connotation in English and a strong musical/genre-implication. The German "*Geräusch*" is a neutral, and a wonderfully onomatopoeic term that includes all kinds of noises as opposed to a more musical, more pleasant sound ("*Klang*"). In German we use it also as an adjective ("*geräuschhaft*") to describe musical sounds that include noises, e.g. in prepared instruments.

Janko Hanushevsky, born 1978 in Linz (Austria). From 1997 to 2002 study of jazz-bass at the Vienna conservatory. Numerous concerts throughout Europe; mainly in the field of contemporary jazz, *Neue Musik*, and freely improvised music. Sound research on travels to India, South East Asia, North Africa, Brazil, and Greenland. He produces since 2002 together with computer musician Eva Pöplein (as duo *Merzouga*) electro-acoustic music, radio art, features and radio plays, as well as film and music for theater. ¶ Premieres in the chamber music hall of *Deutschlandfunk* as well as the Elbe Philharmonic Hall. ¶ Works were created for German broadcasting services *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, *Deutschlandfunk*, WDR, HR, RBB, ZDF/ARTE, the Finnish broadcast Yle, *Hebbel am Ufer* (theater of Berlin), *Schauspiel Frankfurt*, *Münchner Volksbühne* (Munich people's theater), and *Schauspielhaus Graz* (playhouse Graz). The duo released several CDs on Gruenrekorder, which were internationally reviewed. Pieces have appeared on international compilations, including the renowned "Wire Tapper." Janko's radio works and manuscripts have received numerous national and international awards and nominations (including *Prix Europa*, *Prix Marulić*, n-ost prize for news reporting, German Academy of Performing Arts / Radio Play of the Month) and broadcasted by all ARD institutions, the Austrian, Swiss, Finnish, Irish, and Croatian radio. Janko lives in Cologne.

merzougamusic.com

The world out there is entering my consciousness through my ears. Inside I perceive scraps of sound, blowing through my dreams, slowly lifting me from the depths of sleep, imbedded in the juicy, colorful noise of my broken radio.

I am waking up slowly. The subconscious is sinking back into the dark void, consciousness is clicking in again. I stop being the protagonist of my dream and start realizing again who I am, and where I am in time and space.



It's Thursday... not holidays yet... kids have to go to school today... Eva is traveling... I gotta get up and prepare breakfast...

Searching for the snooze button in the dark my first glance of the day: the display.

06:30 AM – the luminous digits show me: less than a minute has passed since the noisy song of my alarm clock started.

I turn it off and sit up in my bed. Arrived.

Still a bit sleepy I climb the stairs down to my living room. At the foot of the stairs, wind chimes are hanging from a beam of the gallery where we are sleeping. Someone gave them to Eva and me as a wedding present. When we got married we were already a duo in sound. I have been touching the wind chimes every morning while walking down the stairs for the past eleven years. The first consciously produced sound of the day.

Followed by the sound of the faucet in my bathroom. The bubbling noise of the electric kettle. The coffee dripping promisingly through the filter.

I am sure that the blackbird sitting on the TV antenna right outside my kitchen window can hear these sounds. But in his world they have no meaning.

It is me, who gives meaning to the alarm clock, the electric kettle, the dripping coffee, because these sounds are connected to actions that are meaningful and relevant in my

life. I love my morning-sounds, and I would miss them, was I ever imprisoned in Cage's famous anechoic chamber.

I can hear the song of the blackbird in my kitchen, while making coffee, but I don't understand what he is saying to his mates in his blackbird language every morning. We don't speak the same language, thus we don't hear the same things, even if we hear the same things.

Sounds exist as physically measurable phenomena without meaning in the world. Only in the context of my everyday life they become charged with meaning.

We cannot shut our ears. They are our most important alarm-organs. We perceive a stream of acoustic signals steadily, 24/7. The very moment something diverges from what we know and what we expect, we start listening. This is how our ears can warn us and in case of an emergency even wake us up in the middle of the night.

The Swiss sound artist Andres Bosshard once told me this story. In the village of Hampi in Northern India, people have been for ages concerned with the sound their community creates. They built their houses in a way that helps the sound to unfold naturally, and yet be reflected pleasantly by the architecture. All windows are open at all times, so the sounds can travel in and out undisturbed. When their village life sounds good, the so-called "honey-wind" is flowing. Everybody is concerned that the sounds and noises their everyday life creates do not unbalance the sound-atmosphere of the village. And because it is In-

dia, this has a spiritual dimension in the life of people. On the local mountain nearby there is a sound temple. Its columns are tuned in sacred Indian scales. In the old times the temple guards played regularly on these columns with large sticks. Spherical music would then descend from the mountain down to the village. However, this "cult of the good sound" originates from a very pragmatic background: until 100 years ago, the greatest threat to the villagers was the tiger. Every once in a while hungry tigers would leave the jungle to hunt in the village. They would mainly kill babies and toddlers.

There was a saying in Hampi: Once you can see the tiger, it is too late, but when you hear the tiger coming, there is enough time to bring the kids to safety.

But how can you hear a tiger, creeping through the paddy fields from the distance?

When the tiger is coming, the cicadas fall silent.

Their z-z-z-z-z-z vibrating all day, all night in the paddy fields suddenly stops just as the tiger leaves the jungle.

The abrupt silence is the sign of alarm. In order to avoid missing this subtle shift in the ambience the collective sound of the village has been carefully maintained, fostered, and cultivated over generations.

Recently I spent a weekend with the kids camping. We set up our tent at a camp site at the edge of a national park.

I couldn't sleep the whole night. My ears constantly transmitted unfamiliar sounds into my half-sleep. For hours on end I observed my brain analyzing the unfamiliar ambience: somebody walking by our tent on his way to the toilet. A fox hunting in the thick forests at the other side of the river. A church bell ringing at 2 AM. A partridge fluttering up somewhere in the fields. From a distance the sound of a car approaching. An owl's call. I did not feel threatened by anything I heard on this peaceful summer night. I knew that I was not at all in danger. No tiger anywhere. Yet I couldn't sleep. I heard every single sound, and could not help it.

Sounds are traces, that the world leaves inside ourselves. We connect to the sounds outside us by giving them meaning. We navigate the world unconsciously by what we hear. Our ears are our compass. That is why sounds are latently narrative for us.

They are abstract and concrete. Both at the same time.

When I walk across the hall from my flat to our studio, the second cup of coffee in my hand, this ambiguity is what I am most interested in. In the sound-compositions me and my wife Eva Poepplein, aka duo *Merzouga*, create, we are interested in sounds ("*Geräusche*") as abstract phonemes and as sonic phenomena that are charged with meaning.

How can I tell a story through sound? What are the musical qualities hidden within our sonic ambience?

Questions we raise in all our work as sound artists, musicians, and authors for radio.

In this very moment I am sitting at the computer in our *Merzouga* studio. The balcony door is wide open. The soft, arrhythmical typing on the keyboard intermingles with the diverse high-pitched chirping, hissing, and tweeting of the mixed colony of swallows and swifts that nestles beneath the eaves of our neighboring house. Dozens of birds are flying through the air outside my balcony door, fast as arrows. In addition I can hear the far away sounds of a construction site. (Scaffolding – hammers, metal rods against planks). The low-frequency drone of a freight train, crossing the Rhine river at a nearby bridge. A scooter in my street. A lorry two streets away. A dad rushing his kid to kindergarten, four stories below me.

I pick up my electric bass and play a low E. A note that vibrates so slowly (at 41 Hz) that you can feel a pulsating rhythm. My Fender Jazzbass, three years my senior and pretty battered and scratched, has an eternal sustain. While the string is ringing, the soundscape around me starts to speak to me musically.

All of a sudden, the swifts chirp in intervals. Small intervals, unclear primes, seconds, and thirds. I realize that the freight train is crossing the bridge in G#, microtonally sinking while moving ahead. The idle running motor of the lorry creates a pulsating rhythm. The sounds of the birds are polyrhythmic structures to that pulse. I can hear the melody of the child calling her father. The two syllables

"*Dad-dy*" move a small third down. The child's voice has a clear and simple rhythm:

Da-----dy,-----wait-----for-----me-----!

Long – long – short – short – long.

By adding a single note to the soundscape (in this case the lowest note on my Jazzbass) I create context. This changes my perception of the sonic atmosphere around me.

Again it is me, who charges existing sonic phenomena around me with meaning. But this time it is not only realizing and analyzing what is going on, and what the sounds around me mean. This time I'm adding a musical dimension to the sonic sphere surrounding me – an aesthetical dimension.

This is the basis for all of the sound-work we do with *Merzouga*.

Yet we are always concerned to be respectful of the ambiguity of the sounds. We never simply press field-recorded ambient-sounds into beats. Even when we create moments of concrete music, the ambient sound ("*Geräusch*") always maintains its abstract qualities.

In our artistic work a sound ("*Geräusch*") always has to be both: an abstract sonic phenomenon in the world of acoustic appearances, and a meaningful sound event in my world shaped by my individual perception.

The acoustic stories we tell thus create room for the listener to develop his or her own images and associations.

After all, your alarm clock sounds different from mine, doesn't it? And even if we theoretically heard the same (which is of course physically impossible), my world would still sound different from yours.

The way we charge sounds with meaning, and even if that process is subliminal – is intimate and highly individual. It resonates with our previous, deeply embodied experiences.

The world tells us about itself through sounds. And whenever we remove the plugs from our ears and start listening, when we charge the world of sounds with our individual meaning, the world sometimes tells us quite amazing stories.

Cologne, July 2019,

JH

LISTENING INTO DISTANCE

SELECTED MEMORY FRAGMENTS AS WORD GESTALT

WE'D FORGOTTEN THE AUDITIVE DISTANCE. Listening into space, into nothingness. Listening into distance. The nothing is in the distance. Nothingness is the something that carries the distance in the soundscape. The soundscape as a whole is an envelope that surrounds me. I am nothing alone. I heard it, so I wrote it down.



Aleksandar Vejnovic (*1991 in Croatia) is an artist, manager, and theorist living in Berlin. ¶ He studied sound and media culture in Darmstadt and Corfu. ¶ As a former lecturer at Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, he taught Intercultural Audience Development and Media Philosophy. ¶ His work focuses on media art facilitation at schools so as for the public. In addition, he contributes as a speaker and writer to discourses about media culture, new media communication, and acoustic ecology.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIARA DOLLAK

September 2016, Eastslavonia, Croatia. The *acoustic horizon*^[a] puts the rushing rug on my ears.

Auf einem Felde, Maschinen zer ssssssss ägen den Himmel
Weibliche Stimme ruft a j o k c i – Kind?

Slawonien, du La... Land der einst brennenden Dörfer.
Asche... Asche... Staub... Staub... zu fruchtbarem Boden.
Innen gekehrtes Feuerkni s t nist r r n...
Felder rschschn
Das Bellen der Hunde... H u n d e ? ...^[b]

sssss
a j o k
rschsch
knistrn
Hun

sss
a j o
rsch
knist
H u

s
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H

Oh distance, be near to me! Sounds, stay away from me!

a The acoustic horizon is a term by R. Murray Schafer, which describes the ability to listen into space.

b On a field, machines sawing up the sky. Female voice calling “a j o k c i” – child? Slavonia, you land of once burning villages. Ashes... ashes...dust...dust...to fertile soil. Inside turned fire crackling. Fields rush. The barking of the dogs.

December 2014, Passau, Germany. You floating city urge me into the wilderness of the dull Inn... I open my ears out into the night: it is New Year’s Eve.

p p p
Pschschhhhhh_____P
pffffff P P
schschhhhhh_____

So I opened my eyes and did not see... the cathedral. Something cloudy. Now I want to see, hear, smell, taste the metallic fine dust at the same time.
I experience my *being-in-the-world*.^[c]

They welcome the new year... I welcome the distance.

February 2017, Serbian Orthodox Cemetery, Topolje, Slavonia, Croatia.

go and stay with the grave forms, A concrete path,
until nothingness suggests to me:
the concrete way is over here, return to life.

February 2015, Old Fortress, Corfu, Greece. Dear reader, at this point I abstain from onomatopoeia and tell you about my listening walk on the fortress. The soundscape opened like a labyrinth. Every short way is a threshold behind which a new sound hides. The fortress provided special listening experiences when viewed from the highest point of the panorama. The side with the direction to the city makes the inner life appear as a distant *Hörgestalt*.

c See terminology of Heidegger.

On the other side – to the sea and to the mainland – an imaginative and contemplative hearing process emerges; the sounds that I think are distant sounds. As I past the church of Agios Georgios and the abandoned building of the old hospital on the fortress, the buildings threw me back into an illusioned world of sound. In short, the world seemed like an inner sound miniature.

A special moment I felt next to the music faculty of the Ionian University, which is located on the side of the stony wall to the sea.

February was a windy month. The gusts drove the waves towards the small pebble beach where the water poured on the stone surfaces.

This sound scenario was complemented by the distant violin playing behind the doors of the faculty. Even my footsteps on the pebbles gave the soundscape a shape. This special interaction between me and the acoustic environment reminds me of the commemorative plaque of the British writer Lawrence Durrell, adorned with the words:

Η Ελλάδα σου προσφέρει την δυνατότητα να ανακαλύψεις τον εαυτό σου...
Greece is the country that offers you // the discovery of yourself...

Let us take up that offer.

May 2019, St. Ludwigskirche, Darmstadt, Germany or *Reflecting on Sound Shadows*. Each one of us must seek his own temple of silence. The silence is the audible nothingness. But in that it is audible, it is something. Nothingness is thus experienced through the something. I refer to the words of John Cage when he remembered Morton Feldman’s statement about sounds as a shadow. He said sounds are not sounds but shadows.^[d]

But Feldman did not speak of sound shadows as such because they are obviously sounds. That’s why they are shadows.^[e] The sound shadow would therefore be a pleonasm. I do not want to dismiss the term too readily. The dome of the St. Ludwigskirche in Darmstadt throws back the polyphonic sounds of the inner space as echoes to the listeners. Every little movement resonates with the walls. I tried not to move but to breathe quietly, and listen to the sounds of the outside world. These perpetuated the dome and became a composition ad absurdum – apparent voices, apparent engines, apparent planes, apparent downtown life but something obvious.

Sound shadows are the echo and the echo is something of nothing. However, this text is not about the echo or the sound shadows or the nothingness, rather a chain of thoughts to the distance. They bring us pure sounds without their physical sources. Yes, the temple of silence is also a place of learning of pure distant sounds.

d John Cage, *Silence*, translated by Ernst Jandl, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1995, p. 42.
e John Cage, *Silence*. p. 42.

Martin Heidegger wrote that it takes a very artificial and complicated setting to *hear a pure sound*. (...) ^[f]

The sounds only become manifold when they break away from the truth that we have constructed linguistically.

AV

f Michael Inwood, *Heidegger*. Wiesbaden: Panorama-Verlag 2004, p. 57.

Thoughts on Listening With and Without a Microphone.

When we go outside with our recorders and record the soundscape, we experience it more intensively. On the one hand, this is due to the set level and on the other hand, to our hearing, which is focused like the record button on the device. As we record, the ears are actively listening. If the intention is to form a soundscape composition from the collected material, it takes shape already during the active listening process.

Let's not forget the learning effect of this technology. By that I mean that the recording devices bring us closer to the soundscape. More importantly, our listening is no longer like everyday habits. The microphone intensifies the everyday, which we have learned to select. The soundscape is a concept. It appears in its entirety. The totality arises through our conscious being.

Perhaps one day we will reach this state of consciousness without the microphone.

Roland Barthes rightly wrote: "*All the sounds belong to me, they touch me, they go to me: I am the addressee of the unknown sound.*" ^[g]

AV

g Roland Barthes, *Wie zusammen leben*, edited by Éric Marty and translated by Horst Brühmann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2007, p. 141.

Descriptive Sounds

“The sound of a car door slamming was not a sound. It was the sound of a car door slamming, and once you accepted this, you had to ask: Whose car? What kind of car? Where is this car? What color is the car?”

— Jim O’Rourke, speaking of Luc Ferrari.

“SOUNDSCAPES” AND MICROPHONES

OFTEN ENOUGH, WE MYSTIFY RECORDED AUDIO and attribute to it a quality of similitude with sound vibrations in the world; the very term “reproducible sound” betrays this

tendency. Audio technology assumes values of high definition, immersion, and verisimilitude, which stubbornly inform listening habits. It’s comfortable to rest in the clarity of a document, as though its fixed pattern confirms the lattice it imitates. The logic goes that since a recording is measurable, the situation it records is measurable too.

Eli Neuman-Hammond is a composer from Massachusetts, USA. He uses field recordings as a means of theorizing place, sound, and listening. Eli holds a bachelor’s degree in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University in Providence, RI, where he completed a thesis on the sounds of contemporary transportation infrastructure. In late 2019 his album *16 Recordings of Ephemeral Percussion Ensembles* was released on Seattle’s and/OAR imprint.

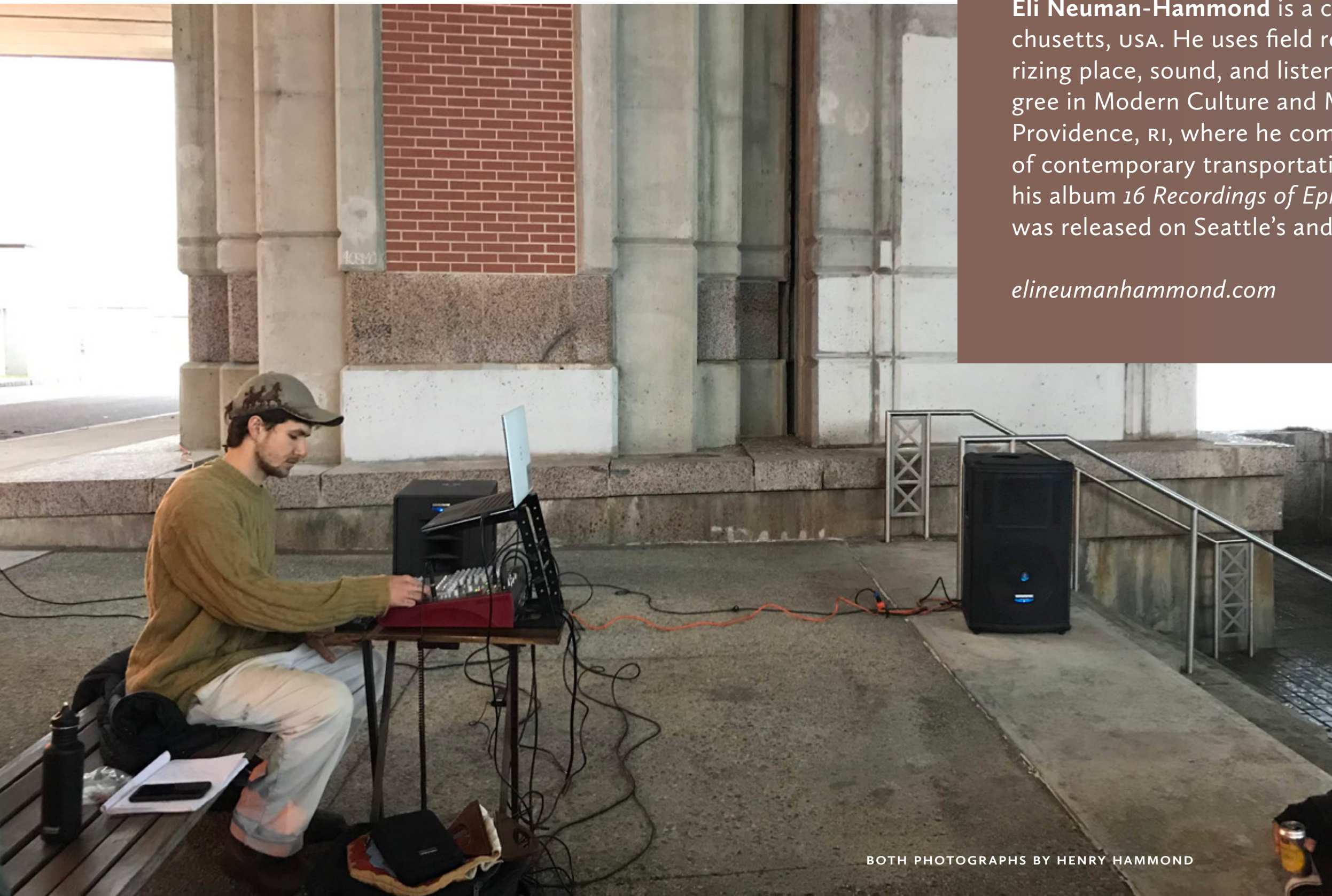
elineumanhammond.com



Actually, the recording situation is irreducible to measurement, and a recording represents one partial, highly subjective description of an event, which *after* it becomes fixed during the recording process, also becomes measurable.

Just as thirty people with a camera will come back with very different photos from the same situation, so will thirty people given a microphone produce very different recordings.

This being the case, what do scholars mean when they use the term “soundscape”? When R. Murray Schafer introduced the term in 1969, it served the rhetorical function of “drawing attention to a sensory register that had been neglected relative to sight.” Recently, however, the concept has come under fire for over-determining the separation between environments, sound, and the perception of sound. As Tim Ingold notes, “sound is not *what* we hear, any more than light is what we see” (Ingold 2007: 11). In other words, sound is a medium of perception, not an abstract object of attention. The soundscape, if it is to be useful at all, should be understood as “both a world *and* a culture constructed to make sense of



that world” (Thompson 2012: 117; emphasis added). There is no soundscape as such, only audible landscapes and listening cultures.^[a]

One of the most useful terms for this shift in thinking around sound is acoustemology, which joins “acoustics” and “epistemology.” Anthropologist Steven Feld coined the term to better theorize sound as a way of knowing. In his words, “acoustemology engages acoustics at the plane of the audible – *akoustos* – to inquire into sounding as simultaneously social and material, an experiential nexus of sonic sensation” (Feld 2015: 12).

Microphones, from this acoustemological perspective, do not reproduce the sonic dimension of the world, lifting sounds from their social-material substrate. Rather, they are creative tools, whose products index sonic events, fixing some waypoint during an otherwise ephemeral scene. The microphone-recorder contradicts sound’s indeterminate, fickle nature by fixing a material transcription of

a Stefan Helmreich usefully historicizes the soundscape, describing it as a “back-formation” from modern sound technologies: “While acoustemologies may range from the Cartesian to the Cagean the soundscape concept has been enabled by technologies of regarding sound at an aesthetic and conceptual remove. Telephony, phonography, architectural acoustics – what Emily Thompson calls ‘the soundscape of modernity’ – permit sound to be apprehended as an abstraction.” (Helmreich 2010). In other words, the tendency to “slice up a landscape along the lines of sensory pathways” is a distinctly technological impulse (Ingold 2007). ¶ I would argue that the paradigmatic soundscapes are the highly composed works of artists such as Hildegard Westerkamp, who often use voiceover, overdubbing, and filtering to *render* a soundscape. These works explicitly work to transport a listener into a particular space, the virtual space of the soundscape. (See “Kit’s Beach” as an example.)

crystallized possibilities. It has a *perspective*, which varies drastically depending on its coordinates, its movements, its pick-up pattern, and its operator. Yet, it creates a reproducible account of events, different from an animal’s memory. A recordist may think and feel that they are recording something analogous to what they hear, only to discover something very different when they play it back later. The microphone-recorder has a *mechanical attention*, and so it remains totally “open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears.” (Hejinian 2000: 138)

This basic paradox of recording technology has led me to think of the microphone-recorder as a descriptive apparatus, not an extractive one. Lyn Hejinian’s phenomenal understanding of description is useful here:

By description I don’t mean after-the-fact realism, with its emphasis on the world described (the objects of description), nor do I want to focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-describer); nor, finally, am I securing the term to a theory of language. I propose description as a method of invention and of composition. Description, in my sense of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange. Description should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative. Hejinian 2000: 138

“A microphone brings matter nearer to us at the same time as it abstracts it into artificial relations with our senses.”

A microphone brings matter nearer to us at the same time as it abstracts it into artificial relations with our senses. It describes and it argues. Signals are headily *amplified* when they pass between kinetic and electric media, and yet an indexical relationship ties the recording to its original momentum. Waveforms are contoured by events happening “out there” in the world, even as they fly away from them. Microphones are promiscuously creative.

SONIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Traditionally, field recordings are an almost scientific affair, concerned as they are with the false idol of objective representation. The most desirable recording setup involves a lot of very expensive, sophisticated technology, all of which is engineered to render the recording process invisible. A low noise floor and a high signal-to-noise ratio are important characteristics of professional pre-amps and microphones. Most field recordists are deeply concerned with clean, hi-fi sound. In many cases, this coincides with a desire to isolate their object of attention. Thus, multiple forms of noise are under scrutiny. A recording of a bird is ruined if a passing hiker enters the scene; a foghorn destroys an otherwise “perfect” recording of waves lapping the shore. These are broad-stroke generalizations, but the point I would like to make is that field recording practice often proceeds from distinct values of nature, transparency, beauty, and clarity that result in highly artificial representations of their objects. I don’t mean to disparage complex recording techniques or hi-fi technology, nor do I admonish the sharp fo-

cus and clear intentions that field recordists bring to their practice. Rather, I would like to underscore that a recording methodology driven by different values is possible and valid, one which respects the both slippery and exacting connections between recordings and life.

Ernst Karel has coined the term sonic ethnography as a provisional category for some work composed using minimally processed and uncut recordings.

Listening to a work of sonic ethnography, giving over to the experience of letting sounds unfold in their own time, experiencing time as being constituted by sounds, allows for a sort of meditation on the subject or subjects at hand; one is not being shown something, but rather is presented with an opportunity to listen to something.

Karel 2013

In a sonic ethnography, recorded audio is arranged as an opportunity to listen, during which listening practices may be interrogated and transformed relative to its subject. The “ethno” in sonic ethnography indicates the subject is always a cultural field or, more precisely, a set of *human cultural practices* and, often, the infrastructural and/or non-human conditions of those practices. Sonic ethnography is concerned more with phenomenological transformation than information or logical argument. Non-textual media counterbalance the historical focus on highly argumentative textual ethnographies, where media gathered during fieldwork is used only towards the end of a rarified written argument. In media anthropology, arguments are enriched, not compromised, by aesthetic engagement and,

often, appreciation. ¶ Minimally processed field recordings are good candidates for sonic ethnographies because they present durations of time, rather than objects of sound. Consider in contrast musique concrete, in which recordings are chopped up and arranged in the abstract and empty space of magnetic tape. This is a negative time, filled up with sound. A microphone is privy to positively overflowing time-space, which *inundates* the sensitive capsule. An audio recording documents a continuous flow.^[a] By presenting a continuous span of audio-time, a recording facilitates a listening experience in which connections can be made without crossing bridges placed by the composer at any point after the recording event (i.e. overdubbing audio from different times, extensive cuts and fades, schizophrenic sounds pasted from other segments of recorded audio). The listener instead sits with a recording in so far as it carries with it a piece of information parallel to the time and situation of the recording. The point is not necessarily to transport the listener to a different space (immersion), but it is always to rewire one’s aesthetic response to a situation that is happening, or happened, somewhere else.

ROAD SOUNDS

The recordings I’m presenting with this essay come from a larger body of work documenting transportation infrastructure in

a I don’t think that the control of the maker is necessarily attenuated when dealing with unprocessed recordings. I think that the toolset and domain of control is different, and that where control shrinks in one area (post-production editing and composition *plus* signal processing tools), it expands proportionately in another (real-time composition *plus* recording tools).

New England called *Road Sounds*. Transportation infrastructure produces the noise-floor of urban experience, and *Road Sounds* proceeds from this floor, elevating it so that what is muted and flat unfolds towards the center of attention. As a rule, the constant aesthetic impingements of transportation infrastructure are filtered out as noise, and this is one reason I directed sustained attention towards them. A quintessentially modern response to the racket of urban noise has been to expand the category of music, which has proven infinitely pliable. Preceding the Futurists’ aggrandizement of war machinery and industrial sounds in the early twentieth century, Henry David Thoreau listened to humming telegraph wires, which sang in the wind like “aeolian harps.” Even in 1851, he expressed the now-common idea that “every sound is music now” (Bock 2006). Since then, the avant-garde has championed

Eli Neuman-Hammond: Road Sounds EP

1. Space 1, I-95 Median in Attleboro (14:51)
2. Space 2, Parking Garage in Salem, Activated by a Horn (7:27)
3. Car Parts Cooling at Different Rates in Jamestown (15:44)
4. Space 3, Platform, Providence (8:40)

Free download: gruenrekorder.bandcamp.com/album/road-sounds

Recorded in Rhode Island and Massachusetts in 2019.
Mastered by Taku Unami.

music of a vast vocabulary, and taken this idea in many directions. As such, I'm not invested in treading over this ground again, although the various sounds of bridges and motors often appeal to my musical taste. My bone to pick is rather with the notion that the sounds of the roads tell no interesting histories.

Car and traffic sounds play a major role in R. Murray Schafer's morally charged account of the soundscape, which was largely mobilized to reclaim "hi-fi" sounds from the din of "lo-fi" sounds which proliferated after the industrial revolution. Even in his early work *The New Soundscape*, Schafer had strong opinions about the sounds of motor vehicles:

Motors are the dominant sounds of the world soundscape. All motors share one important feature: they are low-information, high redundancy sounds. That is to say, despite the intensity of their voices, the messages they speak are repetitive and ultimately boring. There is a hypnotic suggestibility about motors that makes one wonder whether, as they invade our lives totally, they may not mask out all other sounds, reducing us in the process to acquiescent and dopey bipeds indolently fumbling about in a mute hypnotic trance. Schafer 1969: 58

Schafer deduced from his research that noise pollution has now and only recently become a "world problem." I would be hard-pressed to disagree. But I take issue with the claim that noises that are ultimately displeasing to most, and even harmful in some cases, are also ultimately boring. The question that guided my attention to transportation

infrastructure is: *What listening positions and material histories do these sounds index?* To take a simple example, the whishing sound of a busy highway points towards the ultra-smooth asphalt beneath it and a three-hundred-year lineage of terraforming and material development in the service of speedy commerce. We can filter this sound out (and this may very well be desirable!), and we can listen to it as music, but we can also pay attention to what strange conditions of possibility precede it.

"Space 1, I-95 Median in Attleboro," for example, was made on a damp day in February from a patch of the median of Interstate 95 in southern Massachusetts. The microphones were stationary, attached to the median, and so the audio runs adjacent to the median, and catches sound as refracted by this space. The sounds of passing cars are ordinary, but the microphone's position is unexpected: its perspective places us in an industrial science fiction outpost, which is liminally occupied by construction and maintenance workers, the police, and broken down or crashed cars (all states of exception to the high speed commercial, commuter, and leisure-oriented mobility that animates the highway). In this way familiar sounds are made strange, and the blitz of cliché car-sounds blossom into an unexpected world. All the materials of life speed by, transmogrified by velocity into almost gentle tonal streams; commuters, freight trucks loaded with commodities, anonymous travelers. This effect hinges on sustained aural engagement with the site, rather than "reduced listening" in which meaning is parsed as time breaks down into sound objects. **ENH**

SOME FURTHER LISTENING

- Arseny Abraamov, *Symphony of [Factory] Sirens* (1922)
- George Brecht, *Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)* (1960)
- Ernst Karel, *Swiss Mountain Transport Systems* (2011)
- Luc Ferrari, *Presque Rien* (1970/2012)
- Luke Moldof, *KIKI & KIKI* (2017)
- Toshiya Tsunoda, *Extract from Field Recording Archive* (2019)

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WHITE ELEPHANT

NOTES ON AN ENTANGLED
FIELD RECORDING



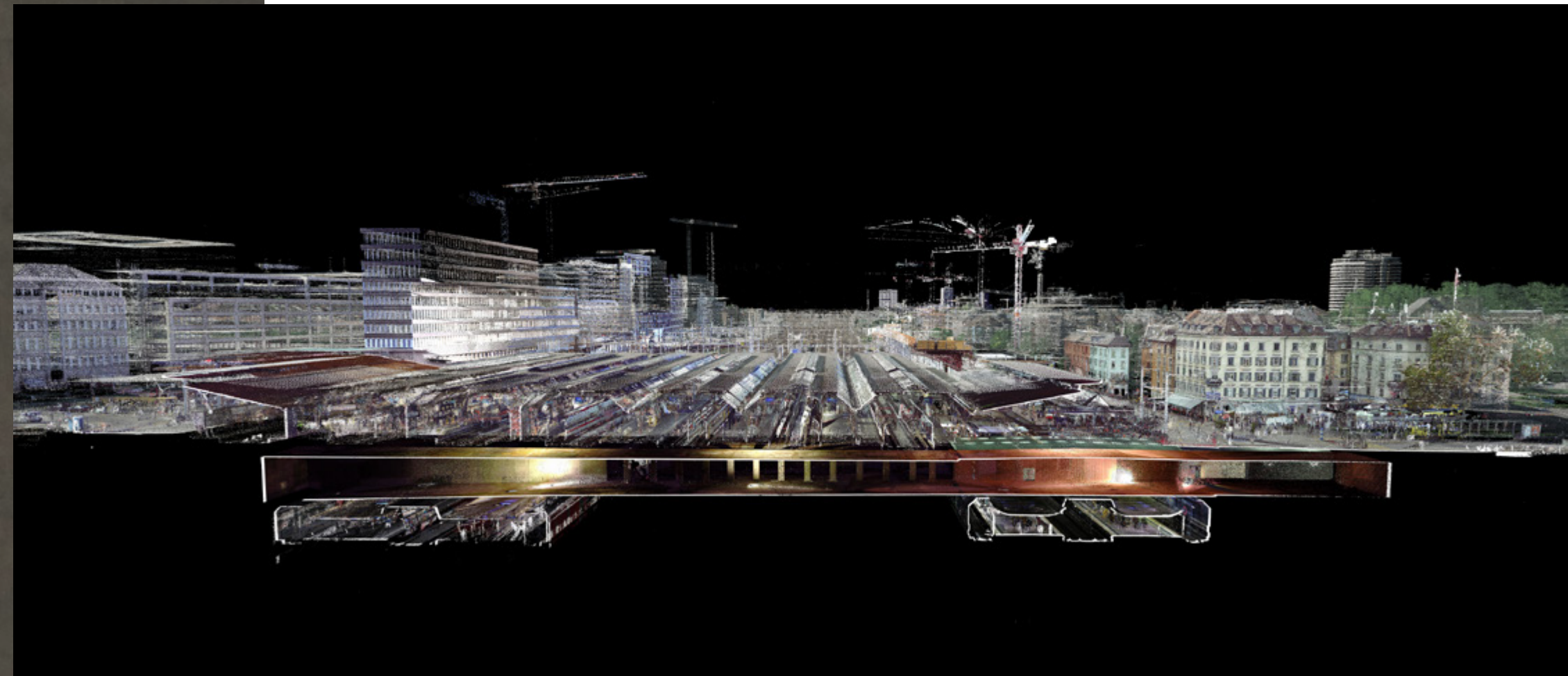
PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHIAS VOLLMER

Ludwig Berger is a sound artist and composer based in Zürich and Milan. In his compositions, installations, performance scores and sound walks, he engages in more-than-human worlds such as beehives, hydropower plants, glaciers, singing synthesisers or trees. He has released various albums of field recordings, electroacoustic music and microscopic improvisations (Impulsive Habitat, Canti Magnetici, Dinzu Artefacts) and composes sounds and music for documentary films. He is curator of the tape label Vertical Music and runs the monthly radio show “wabi-sabi” at Radio Raheem. As research assistant at the Chair for Landscape Architecture of Christophe Girot at ETH Zurich, he teaches sound for architects and studies the sonic dimension of alpine glaciers, water infrastructures and Japanese gardens. He studied electroacoustic music at the University of Music FRANZ LISZT Weimar.

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AN ELEPHANT LIES DIRECTLY BENEATH THE TRACKS of the main railway station in Zürich, Switzerland. 170 metres long, 24 metres wide, 5 metres high. As part of a large infrastructure project in the 1970s, it was the beginning of a proposed highway tunnel. The project was controversial, as a motorway junction was already to be built in the mid-

Longitudinal section: track field with perron roofing; SBB central station Zürich, Switzerland. © SCANVISION 2019. ▼



dle of the city. Due to a popular initiative, the project was finally stopped, and as a result, this concrete shell was left behind between the long-distance above-ground traffic lanes and the regional train tracks underground. A huge, useless building in the middle of the city. An investment ruin, garnering the name “white elephant,” without any function since 30 years. Currently, there are plans to make a bicycle underpass out of the tunnel fragment, but in the meantime the void is still silently encased in concrete.

I first accessed this place to take photographs for the permanent exhibition “Einfach Zürich” in the *Landesmuseum Zürich*. I composed a 12-channel soundscape using field

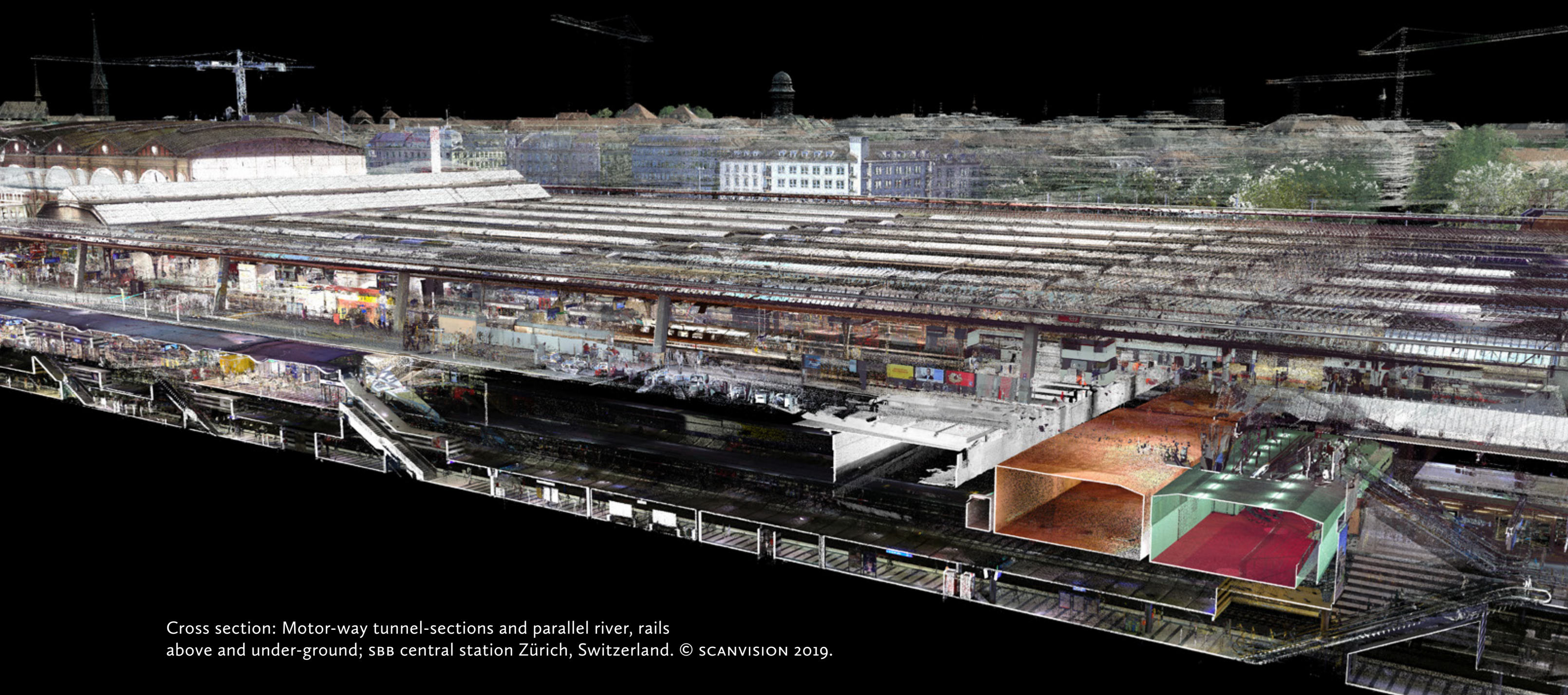


recordings of the city and the canton for an animation by the point-cloud artists of SCANVISION, who visualized districts of Zürich in 3D laser scans. A central part of the audiovisual component in this work is Zürich Central Station and its complex ramifications of tracks, pedestrian passages, shopping centres, restaurants, logistics centres and canteen kitchens. When I entered the tunnel fragment from a discreet door in the pedestrian passage, I was impressed by the monumental effect of concrete, darkness, space and sound. I felt like I was in a secret centre of the city, imposing and empty. I heard all the sounds in this place as dark, deep and long. The resulting sonic metaphors that came to me coincided with my visual perception. You could hear the long, deep drone of the distant trains, as well as regular dull blows that reverberated for a long time in the room – to this day, I cannot explain the origin of the latter sounds. I received the following answer from the press office of the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB):

Our noise specialist could not explain the sounds. My assumption (rail joints) did not prove to be true – in this case, several impacts could be heard in quick succession. The sounds, which obviously spread over the walls of the city tunnel, could come from almost anywhere, for example from trams on Museumstrasse.^[a]

Fascinated by the rhythm and shape of these unknown sounds, I installed my recording device in a side tunnel and started a one-hour recording to experience the space in its temporal depth.

a Email from Rafael Hirt, Media spokesman of SBB, Sept. 9, 2019.



Cross section: Motor-way tunnel-sections and parallel river, rails above and under-ground; SBB central station Zürich, Switzerland. © SCANVISION 2019.

For some years now, I have been experimenting with long-term recordings and time compressions. After 24-hour recordings in a beehive as well as in a Buddhist temple in Kyoto,^[b] I installed a microphone in my home village in Alsace and recorded for a whole year at hourly intervals. I mounted the sounds to a seamless montage, in which the listeners can explore four different times of the day through the whole year.^[c] In these long-term recordings, the rhythms of the weather, the plants, the activities of humans and other animals overlap, cross and unite, in both

b Together with Nadine Schütz, Chair of Girot, Institute of Landscape Architecture, ETH Zürich in Cooperation with the Design Lab of Kyoto Institute of Technology. Not published yet.

c *A Year's Hours Behind my Father's House*, Impulsive Habitat, 2014 ([free download](#)).

the small and the large scale. Some of these sounds return in short or long cycles, but everything is subject to constant change. From minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, year to year. Already now, five years after the recording, climate change and insect mortality have changed the soundscape. The voices and noises change their shape and frequency of occurrence, or disappear. On the one hand, the longer one records in one place, the sharper it becomes, because more and more possible sounds become audible. On the other hand, it becomes blurrier, because the possibilities and impossibilities of certain sounds are constantly changing. In the course of time, the place unfolds, but without reaching a fixed form. In this respect, a one-year recording is no more “complete” than a

one-minute recording of a place. It only reveals more clearly its fluid quality.

In my last works, I try to explore the changes of a place on a smaller scale. Recently, I published a one-hour uncut field photograph of a “singing” tree on a Japanese island.^[d] Recorded with a contact microphone, the recording focuses entirely on the tonal articulations of the tree, which are created by the movement of the wood in the wind. The sounds have strong similarities with a wind instrument playing on a certain scale. Some hear a violin, or the song of a bird. Beyond these anecdotal associations, subtle changes in melody, rhythm, timbre and dynamics become audible. The long duration of the recording requires patience when listening, but in its narrowness it offers the possibility of expanding one's own perception. A possibly arising boredom can only be overcome by listening more closely. In the words of Zen Buddhism, articulated by John Cage:

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.^[e]

Also in the one-hour recording of the tunnel, the sound sources are reduced to the extreme: distant drones and regular impacts. The frequency and intensity of the tones and the volume of the impacts, however, never remain the same; the reduced material is constantly varied and superimposed in the almost endless reverberation of the room. The sound space unfolds over the course of the hour, but

d “*Inumaki, Esuzaki*,” Vertical Music, 2019.

e John Cage: *Silence*. Lectures and Writings, Middletown 1973, p. 93.

does not develop linearly. The recording does not run along a horizontal axis, but rather corresponds to the “Vertical Music” described by Jonathan Kramer:

Compositions cast in “vertical time” [...] lack progression, goal direction, movement, and contrast. The result is a single present stretched out into an enormous duration, a potentially infinite “now” that nonetheless feels like an elongated instant. Vertical music [...] tries not to impose itself on or manipulate the listener. The context of vertical music allows a listener to make contact with his or her own subjective temporality. It is music of subjectivity and individuality.^[f]

If you listen to only five minutes of the recording, you have already perceived all elements of the acoustic scene. The questionable goal to “represent” a place would be fulfilled. If you listen to the whole hour with full attention, it is not the listening object that develops in the first place, but your own listening. In the course of time, subtler changes and the conditionality of one’s own perception can become conscious. The act of hearing can listen to itself as it creates meaning and structure, perceive sounds from non-musical contexts as musically and intentionally, and distinguish various “objects” which come out of the loudspeaker membranes. I am always fascinated by the fact that our ears actually only perceive one sound wave at a time and that we only isolate individual sound sources from each other during the stimulus processing. However,

f Jonathan Kramer: *Postmodern Music, Postmodern Listening*, New York/London 2016, p. 158.

the perceived sound sources cannot be assigned to distinct objects that are actually isolated from each other, but are based on a certain acoustic perspective. Once I stood with Japanese students in a garden in Kyoto and asked them how many sounds the nearby stream had. They said: “one.” I let them go some closer to the stream, where some stones stood in the water. I asked them how many were listening and they replied: “three.” When they went even closer to the stream, they heard even more distinctly how the large and small stones break the water flow, how small vortices form, how small waves slosh over each other and gurgle among each other. I asked them how many sounds they heard now – they shrugged their shoulders. Only from a certain perspective is it possible to hear the sound of one stream.

In the case of the tunnel I recorded, the room acoustics unite all sounds into a characterful, homogeneous soundscape. The sounds of the trains and the strikes intrude diffusely from the ceiling, the floor and the walls into the building shell and reflect again and again at the smooth and flat concrete walls, whereby always standing sound waves develop. What one would describe as an “empty” space from a tactile or visual experience creates an acoustically roaring plenitude.

Space is more than just a container in which sound events take place. It is an inseparable part of any sound. No sound exists without space. And no room acoustics can be “neutral,” as there is no detached observer position. Would one really be able to hear the sounds of the trains and strikes


on the surface more “directly”? From which perspective, exactly? From one metre of distance, or from one centimetre of distance?

We are always in the midst of sound. With our ears we cannot listen “into” the world, because we ourselves are a part of the world. We cannot take a certain “perspective” on sound because we ourselves are part of it. The physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad concludes from insights of quantum physics:

Bodies are not situated in the world; they are part of the world. Objectivity can't be a matter of seeing from somewhere, as opposed to the view from nowhere (objectivism) or everywhere (relativism), if being situated in the world means occupying particular coordinates in space and time, in culture and history.^[g]

Even my audio recorder, with its two omnidirectional and cardioid microphones, does not create a copy of the world, but as an acting body it is part of the world, it configures it and creates new (im)possibilities. The recorder is just as much an inseparable part of the soundscape as is the texture of the concrete, the construction of the tracks and trains, the timetable of the Swiss Federal Railways, Zürich’s traffic management in the 1970s, the political system of popular initiatives in Switzerland, the loudspeakers on which the recording is played, and this text with which I talk about the recording.

g Karen Barad: *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham & London 2007, p. 376.



At the beginning of this text, I describe my own listening experience. I experience the dark abandoned place from the first moment as purely aesthetic, rather than potentially threatening. A person with varying previous experiences might have a different perception in this lightless concrete space. The space might not be seen as “sublime,” the sounds of the space not just as fascinating, varying musical elements.

I can primarily perceive the given situation as purely musical and not also potentially threatening, as I have been spared certain negative experiences. To be able to withdraw oneself from a situation and to become an apparently objective observer is a privilege.^[h] By no means should this be confused with an “independent” position. Sara Cattin, an artist and friend of mine, interviewed wandering shepherds in the Italian Alps for her project “Maintenance of What?”. When she and a shepherd watched the summer sundown over the flooded paddy fields, a discussion about the beauty of the landscape began:

Sara Cattin: *Ciao Andrea, what a landscape here! It's wonderful!*

Andrea Maffeo: *No... It is not so beautiful.*

Sara Cattin: *Yeah! I mean, this landscape: the mountains on a distance... the paddy fields have been flooded!*

Andrea Maffeo: *There is not a tree anywhere... it is like being in a desert.*^[i]

Who lives in a landscape instead of looking at it from distance, has completely different ideas what a “beautiful landscape” is. In the 1970s, Murray Schaefer presented his widely acclaimed theory of the “soundscape,”^[j] which, with its universalistic gesture, often masks his own cultural imprint and thus his specific position as a listener. From his romantic idealization of silence and demonization of noise and from a dualistic separation of nature and culture, he

h Marie Thompson: *Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies*, Parallax, 23:3, p. 266–282. [PDF]

i Sara Cattin: *Maintenance of What?*, 2019.

j Murray Schaefer: *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Vermont 1977. [PDF]

articulates an aesthetic moralism that divides soundscapes into “lo-fi” and “hi-fi”.^[k]

Soundscape, place, recording and listener, are not given isolated entities. They are mutually dependent. The recording creates the place, just as the place creates the recording, just as the space creates the sound and the sound creates the space, just as the listener creates the listening object and the listening object creates the listener. Perhaps long-term recording offers the possibility of a space for thinking in which the conditionality of one’s own hearing can also be heard. A space in which not only the soundscape unfolds until it deconstructs itself, but also the listening that is part of the sound. **LB**

Ludwig Berger: White Elephant

1. White Elephant (1:01:16)

Recorded at Swiss Federal railways central station, Zurich, Switzerland in 2019.

Free download: gruenrekorder.bandcamp.com/album/white-elephant

k For a critique of this position see Marie Thompson: *Unwanted Sound. Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism*, London 2017.



