

# Field Notes

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Christoph Korn

**REFLECTIONS ON SOUND**

*Translation by Tamy Harutoonian & Tobias Fischer*



Photo: Andrea Kroth

**Christoph Korn**, audio artist, born in 1965, studied Philosophy and Political Science; political work in the 80s; since the beginning of the 90s freelance audio artist; in recent years predominantly dealing with analogue and/or mechanically induced deletion processes. His works were performed at numerous international festivals of contemporary music and media-art. Lecturer & guest lecturer at several universities; grants and scholarships for composition and media art.

Philologist Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt points out that German is an extremely precise language in terms of describing things. In German, the halophilic plant is called a “salt-loving plant,” psychographics are translated as “soul-descriptions,” a pull cart (also known as *Red Flyer wagon*)—called “Bollerwagen” [ˈbɔləˈvaːɡn̩] in German—is “thudding along,” referring to the word “bollern” [ˈbɔləŋ] and an otorhinolaryngologist is an “ear-, nose- and throat specialist.”

The term “Geräusch,” [ɡəˈrɔʏʃ] meaning sound, appears to be similarly concrete sound-wise. So, let us listen to its sound for a start: Ge [ɡə] -räusch [ˈrɔʏʃ].

There it is: “Geräusch,” “rauschen” [ˈraʊʃŋ] referring both to the rush of water and hissing. And if we loop the sound “sch” [ʃ] (sch—sch—sch—sch...), which characterises the whole wording, it almost brings to mind the “Stimmgeräuschexperimente” (voice sound experiments) of contemporary composers of the 1950s. Something else is quite striking as well: We do not see the sound, we

only *hear* it. At best, we may see its source, but not the sound itself. It is *invisible*. The world of the sound apparently is not the objective world. Sound inhabits the invisible sound waves. Acoustic pressure presses. It presses the acoustic noise [invisibly] through space straight into the ear. The sound is *relocated*: inside (the ear) from the outside (source of sound, the air).

In the first instance, we note a banal but striking discovery: sound is invisible, it refers to hearing (not seeing).

From a cultural history of hearing, we know that hearing, as a sense of information and orientation, was ranked before seeing. The gods, first and foremost, could be heard (if one could set eyes on them at all). From the sounds of thunder and lightning—though one can not see their origin—one reads the wrath of the gods. The invisible fires one's imagination. Ulysses does not succumb to the singing of the sirens since he has allowed himself to be tied up at the mast of his ship. He does not see the sirens, he only *hears* them. Its invisibility renders the singing dangerous. It is the *potentiality* which the invisibility attributes to it, that which is not used, the innominate attendee. It is this which drives Ulysses wild.

If we were to describe the state of aggregation of sound waves induced by acoustic pressure, then it would most likely resemble a liquid state. Sound and its waves are flowing. Things are in a state of *flux*. There *seems* to be more than there really is. It is *volatile*. Not only its position in space, also its “I am somehow or other” is extremely *vague*. Only parts of this “volatile flowing” interconnect, disband, and interconnect again in a different configuration. Like a landscape made of ice, only much quicker. It is merely parts of this flow, which are received/integrated/demerged by the discerning eye. Other things remain concealed but are still *present*. Like that part of an iceberg concealed by water, covered, spatial, indicating historicity.

Not only sound waves flow but also *time*. When we listen to a sound, time always passes. Sound is inescapably bound to time, as well as the representational object “table” is bound to a specific and determined locality in space. *When I am inside a sound then I am inside time*. On the other hand—and this is much more specific for the sound—the reverse is true as well: “When I am inside time then I am inside a sound.” Sound exists always and everywhere even in an anechoic space. There, one still hears the sound of

one's own blood circulation. In the beginning, there was sound and it never went away.

The invisibility of sound is suddenly reversed through the parameter of *volume*, or to put it in more musical terminology, dynamics. At a highly frequented junction, in a commercial break, underneath the entry lane of an airport, next to a jack-hammer, fore- and background disappear, the spatial characteristics of sound disappears. Acoustic pressure presses, time is called NOW. Every minute, every second, every frame is illuminated by densely packed acoustic pressure-particles. Structural depth and spatiality disappear, making way for either a pure or a grainy surface—depending on the characteristics of a sound. This phenomenon is also called noise.

The timelines of past, present and future amalgamate to a unified “now.” in the occurrence of noise. The historicity of sound gets lost. *I am inside the noise and the noise is me.* Within the state of noise *everything* is visible. Everything contracts to a precise “now.” You can actually see this “now,” it is truly and entirely tangible. The reason for this fact is that there is nothing but this noise and the aforementioned “now.” Only in death, this last, precisely defined remainder would get lost as well.

Everything is revealed, bare and isolated, without history, without mystery, in the present time. It is a visibility of *seeing*, not one of *looking*, of *hearing*, not of *harking*. When you're inside noise, there's no looking but only seeing. Noise generates a wall of sound. This wall is firm, it has no membranes and nothing that could enable or require a supposition or a harking. Questions like “Are you listening to what you are hearing?” as sound artist Pauline Oliveros asked in one of her compositions, make no sense in the state of noise.

The times, when the Beatles cancelled one of their concerts mid-way because their amplifying equipment, not loud enough for the occasion, was drowned by the shouts of joy of young ladies and lads, are over. The latest PA systems are potential weapons. They provide destructive decibels levels and even go beyond that. In pop, rock, contemporary music and noise music—which emerged in the eighties—people obviously work with extreme sound intensities. People know about the effects of these sound intensities and want their exhilarating feature of *nowness*.

Composer Dror Feiler, when asked why his concerts are so extremely loud, prosaically replied that he did

not want people's minds to wander off. Extreme sound intensity means that the auditory needs to listen. There is no denying that this justification holds a post-Maoist castigatory intention.

In concerts of artist Phill Niblock, volume is used in a highly subtle way. During his concerts, Niblock sets his drone-like conglomerates of sound and tone pitches to an almost constant 120 decibel (for comparison: a launching jet fighter produces approximately 130 decibel) and collages them with large-area projections of documentary shots that mostly show people during archaic working processes. The work dallies with the idea of how sound can produce timelessness and implants the image of a continual working process. The image becomes a harking, the sound turns into a seeing. Between these poles, a storm is raging.

To listen to a sound also means to *anticipate*. Unlike language, which requires a big effort to detach itself from its semantic ligation, the sound *sui generis* is vague and symbolic. Only parts of a sound can be sustainably impropriated in the process of perception. The parts of its specific materiality for example. They can be described as being loud, quiet, grainy, even, ascend-

ing, apostatising etc.... There is a part, however, which remains "unpronounceable." We merely have an intuitive feeling of its characteristics, much more than we could actually spell it out. A premonition *rises*. It *hisses*.

It doesn't seem far-fetched to me to hint at the Freudian concept of the unconscious. A sound *rises* rather than being placed, like language for example. A sound flows from the bottom up, from an innominated *attender* into the consciousness, just like language ploughs its way into the unconscious from the opposite direction. Sound essentially remains liquid, shapeless and without space. Even though it is present, it is so without name. You don't address it like a person. Rather, it is an *It*. It is also linguistically a neuter, relating to the neutral sex in German: "das Geräusch." One shouldn't over-analyze this. However, neuters do seem to be "more alien, restrained, general and irresolute than the others."<sup>1</sup> And indeed a *Geräusch* (any kind of noise or sound) is a different thing than a *Klang* (the timbral aspect). The phrase "*Der Klang der Zitterpappel im Wind*" (The way, an aspen sounds like in the wind) carries a different meaning than the phrase "*Das Geräusch der Zitterpappel im Wind*" (The sound of

<sup>1</sup> Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt: *Als Freud das Meer sah*, Frankfurt 2005, p. 35.

an aspen in the wind). The “Klang” phrase seems more complete. Whereas in the “Geräusch” phrase there seems to be something missing. Something has been left without a name. An inner restlessness emerges. What is meant by “das Geräusch der Pappel im Wind” (sound of an aspen in the wind)? Is it a harbinger of sorrow? Is it the commemorative trace of two lovers? Does it constitute a counterpoint to the ascending sound of the church bells from the valley...? It is the *potentiality* that this phrase generates. An emerging anticipation. It is the potentiality of the sound itself which comes to the fore. The as yet unlabeled substance, the shapeless, the frivolous, the untamed, still concealed, waiting.

SOUND/*Geräusch*—a term which in its uncertainty can barely put up with itself. Whereas a “Klang”/timbre seems to constitute its cultivated part, freed from “dirty” components.<sup>2</sup> You might say that it is the worked-through, domesticated and aesthetic part of sound.<sup>3</sup> *Sound* (*Geräusch*), on the contrary, is potentially

2 A Contemporary composition, which is by its materiality an absolutely noisy-organized *sound*, is to be classed among this.

3 This is exactly what makes John Cage’s conception so outstanding: By generating sounds coincidentally (and not by the shaping ability of the composer) it is taken back to a potential everything,

white noise.<sup>4</sup> It contains that which is dead as well as the living, the potentiality of deconstruction as well as of construction. This is why sound can be described as being liquid: its potentiality. It contains everything, heaven *and* hell.

We have seen how the phenomenon of volume inverted the invisibility of sound into a visibility. Similarly abruptly, liquid turns into solid form, the potentiality turns into a single precise function confronting a sound which is unbroken in its purpose, *complete* in its intention. Let’s take a noise phenomenon, which becomes entirely one with its purpose, as an example to outline the difference between such a particular emission and a sound or a timbre: A detonation.

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that is to say, as in the indicated terms, into a sound, which in Cage’s conception is equivalent to a *wanting-nothing*. ¶ This wanting-nothing, that is to say, to be present as “not-shaped,” one may say, is the original substance of the sound. The access techniques of the so-called “field recording” scene, in so far, generate actual “noise-music”: the pure listening, receiving and imaging of what is to be found in the soundscape, without any machining intermediate stages of the sound material.

4 That is why we have to conceive the singing of the sirens in the *Myth of Ulysses* as a sound rather than as a generalised noise.



A detonation is *concrete*. It has no potentiality. It is completely sure of itself. It means, is and wants only one single thing: destruction. This purpose is contained within the detonation and fills it up completely. There are neither *niches nor spare room here*. The detonation is *exclusive*. It is difficult to imagine this sound, the blast, then the rupture of human beings and material. The detonation requires no interpretation, no ambiguity, no anticipation. It is inescapable, without discontinuity *and* concrete. It represents the completely defined function of this acoustic emission, which paves its way through the ear and into one's synapses.

As a consequence of a detonation, people jump from burning skyscrapers on September 11th. On TV, an eye-witness recently said that "it is the sound of the bodies hitting the ground which I can't forget." We can imagine the state of aggregation of such a sound as *solid*—without potentiality, without premonition. *It is what it is* and that is possibly the reason why it is inescapably fixed in the memory of that man.

In World War I, which offered an unprecedented *output* of detonations, the ear turns into a futuristic funnel into which massive loudness is poured. At first, under the

(acoustic) pressure of the battle, everything still works. Then, a little later, in silence, the big shiver begins. The so-called war-shiver of World War I, a post-traumatic stress disorder, causing body parts—occasionally the whole man—to tremble ceaselessly and without control. It is as if the precise and completely defined function of the roar, tremor and vibration of the acoustic pressure tons pressurising the synapses are finding an equivalent in the human body and an objective shape in the muscular system.

Such niche-free sound comes across as remarkably nameless taken by itself. Sound and timbre always have loopholes, where imagination, looking for shelter from that which besieges it, is able to settle down. In addition to sound and timbre, apparently, there seems to be a *third entity*, a form of sound which rules out any kind of escape. Helpless as a child, and nameless, sound is facing itself. Language comes to the aid and whispers a word: annihilation.

This acoustic phenomenon is neither sound nor timbre. The unbroken, the niche-free, *the complete* generates the *complete sounding*, the merciless and nameless, most inhumane kind of clangor.

Noise, at any rate, potentially carries such inhumanity inside itself. It is a kind of primordial soup to feed on. In timbre, it turns into a minoritarian harking and into a “Ihr Völker Gottes alle, klatscht in die Hände, jubelt Gott zu im Jubelrufe.” (“O clap your hands, all ye nations, shout unto God with the voice of joy.”—*The Writings of Francis of Assisi*, Ps 46,2). Or it turns into the third option, the option of absoluteness. Inside sound, there are heaven and hell. Sound is not innocent.

CK—October 2006



Costa Gröhn

## 8 THESES ON FIELD RECORDINGS

*Translation by Costa Gröhn*



**Costa Gröhn**, born 1976 in Bad Segeberg (Schleswig-Holstein); studied evangelical theology in Kiel, Athena and Hamburg (1996–2003); dissertation about “Dieter Schnebel and Arvo Pärt: Composers as ‘Theologians’” (2003–2006); Vicar at the *Northelbian Evangelical-Lutheran Church* since 2006.

Soundscape compositions, performances and sound installations since 2000.

I Making field recordings presupposes that you take your time to stay in one place longer than you would have first found necessary. II Listening to field recordings means to trace a place and a time to discover something that sometimes originates in your own imagination. III Field recordings unfold the beauty of what appears to be something commonplace. IV Field recordings induce you to reflect on the world and question its state. V There are no limitations to field recordings. The selection of recorded objects describes a process of art. VI Field recordings recollect and reflect

memories of all that has been. VII Field recordings capture the world: Environment (different sound occurrences from spatial distance) and inner world (animals, human beings, machines at close range). VIII “There are always enough excuses why I should not make any field recordings!” (Lasse-Marc Riek)

CG—August 14, 2005





Marcus Obst

UNTERBECKEN MARKERSBACH  
THE MAGIC OF NATURE & ELECTRICITY  
*Translation by Tobias Fischer*

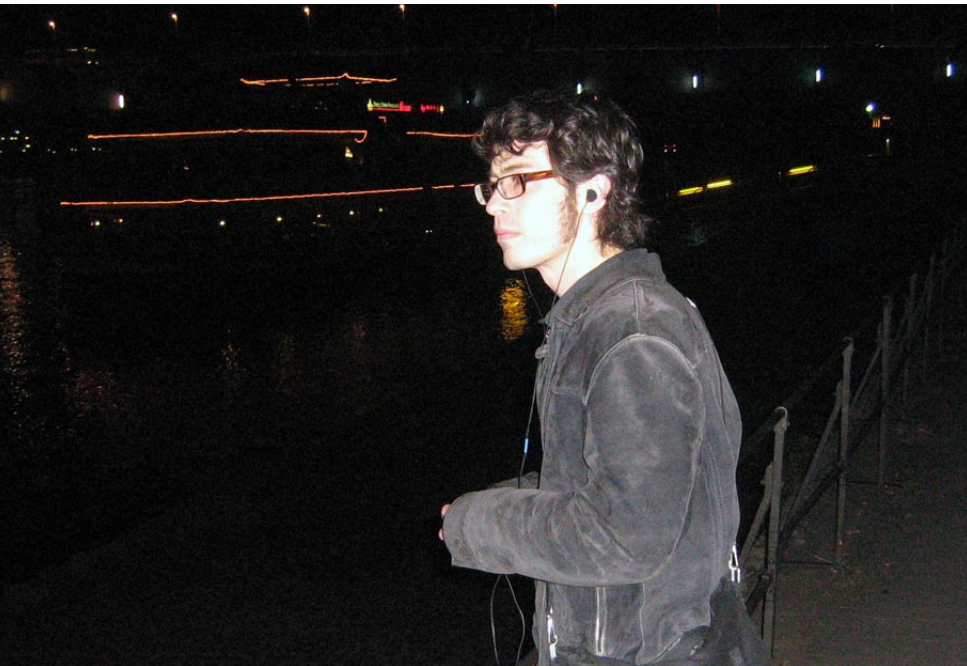


Photo: Mirco Uhlig

**Marcus Obst**, born in March, 1978 in Halle/Neustadt (GDR); since 1997 several releases under the name of Dronæment and launching the small tapelabel Nauze Muzick.

The Field Muzick label was established in 2001 and focuses on the usage of field recordings in a musical context.

Autodidact in any domains.

I've been visiting the Unterbecken in Markersbach/ Erz Mountains for about 10 years now. It is part of the *Vattenfall* energy corporation, which also runs a couple of other hydroelectric water plants. The Markersbach plant was built between 1970 and 1981 and has been operational until today.

It works according to a very simple mechanism: At an altitude of approximately 850 meters, an artificial reservoir was built (the upper reservoir). The water is funneled through a system of pipes and powers the

turbines, which in turn create electricity. The water then flows into the lower reservoir of the former Nitzschhammertal, only to be pumped up again using the cheap electricity prices at night.

This is no trick. One could consider it “magic,” though, that what now constitutes the lower reservoir and what was formerly known as the Nitzschhammertal used to be a small settlement. Okay, quite a few settlements disappeared in Germany thanks to the industry depriving them of their space—but what is the real magic here?

To me, it is the way in which nature, technology and sound interrelate and form a (subjectively) perfect symbiosis. Even though this electricity-generating monster



*Electric utility*

may look industrial, I find it perfectly agreeable to spend my time in its proximity, because it is situated in the middle of nature. To me, it is like a giant sonic sculpture. The transformers of the plant produce a unique “drone tone,” which is not unpleasant at all. Really, it is a con-

stant humming, which I can even perceive from where I live, a couple of kilometers off—depending on the wind direction.



*Unterbecken*

If you get real close to the transformers and the pylons, you can hear the crackling of the high voltage electricity and on the other side, the sound merges with the noises of the water, the wind and the chirping of birds. It is an ideal and endless *feld muzick* composition, with the wind and its direction modulating the tone, a traveling tune replenished by the babbling of the waves at the shore and the “white noise” of the rustling birch trees.

Unfortunately, part of the environment is transforming into a commercial area filled with plate halls and the



racket of cars. And yet, depending on the time of day, these production facilities contribute to the aural action. Occasionally, you could hear a metallic screeching probably caused by the resident container service.

In the summer, the laughing of children going for a swim and their skinny-dipping parents mixes in as well. Only the fishers are sitting silently among the rocks, leaving behind their fish hooks and beer cans.

In wintertime, when the lower reservoir is frozen, the strangest objects form from the ice, revealing their inner tension through snapping and squealing. It is the swelling and lowering of the water level which causes these huge sheets of ice, whose appearance gets more bizarre over time and can even be traced back to the flooded trees and bushes.

I have been visiting this place for more than ten years, taping it in regular intervals and each visit is fresh and exciting. I sincerely wish for nature to reclaim more space there.

MO—February 2007



*Intake, bell-mouthed spillway, electric utility*



MARCUS OBST • UNTERBECKEN MARKERSBACH



*Bell-mouthed spillway & intake in winter*



*Ice formations*





*Early Nitzschhammertal (photographer unknown)*

**Further Information**

Fieldmuzick: *The Unterbecken Project*

Wikipedia: *Pumpspeicherwerk Markersbach*





Stefan Militzer

TONES, SOUNDS & NOISES

PART 1: A SMALL TYPOLOGY OF SOUND

*Translation by Julia Kowalski & Steffanie Göttel*



Photo: Stefan Miltzer

**Stefan Miltzer**, studied philosophy at the Universities of Dresden, Tübingen, Essex and Frankfurt/Main. He is currently working on a Ph.D. thesis about the legitimacy of liberal democracy as perceived by the philosophy of law.

Other fields of research: Genealogy of cultural identities, contemporary art and political interventions.

Web project: <http://phober.de/>

Field recordings have only very recently been recognized as a genre in art. Therefore it is quite a young business we are dealing with. Although ethnographers already recorded vocal performances and rhythms of foreign cultures about 100 years ago, they did not think it was art or even a creative discourse with their environment. What those ethnographers might have thought of such colonial sounds was the fact that at best they sounded artistically to them. So recording those sounds, however, seemed to offer the possibility to categorize the world as a whole in a scientific way. Not so today: Contemporary

artists who deal with field recordings today do no longer have the idea of putting sounds on stock (though it cannot be denied that some of those people have fallen for the act of collecting sounds). Well, apart from this special purpose, field recordings seem to have changed over the last couple of centuries. They represent themselves as a very special kind of music. But let's stop here to think about some essential questions: Are we really allowed to take field recordings for music? Does every sound that is not scientifically recorded automatically become music? What is the difference between noises

and music? And what position has language in comparison with noises and music for not only being recorded but also recognized and artistically arranged?

I. If we were asked to name the most frequent sounds, most likely the answer would be “music.” Music is our everyday company. How often do we listen to music while driving the car, preparing food or working at the office? Pop-culture actually comes through the open windows into the streets. And thanks to mobile phone users, even on the underground we are able to listen to the latest from Turkey or the U.S. Music is just all around. To support this, we do not need to point to Schumann’s piano music playing at a candle light dinner. The worldwide selling of mp3-players really speaks for itself. Never before did so many download platforms exist as they do today. Compared to the rate of inflation, prices for a concert ticket have dramatically increased over the last years, well, at least in Western Europe.

But why do we listen to music? Or more specific: why do we listen to that particular music, that we actually listen to? What makes music being recognized as music and not as terrible racket or something very annoying or even torturing? The answer is very simple: namely, just

because we love it. Considering the top labels and how they support new releases by spending a lot of money, we get an insight in how music actually becomes “our” music. It is the labels’ tastes we become addicted to. Music is consumer good and therefore depends on the market and its values. Consequently artists have to fit into this kind of “circle” and need to assimilate to the circle’s conditions. Otherwise artists would not get the chance to spread their work among people who pay attention to it. And this is even more true for those artists who have to make a living out of their art. Actually without publicity, reputation, gigs, references, awards or the press, any action or expression would remain silent. This, at least, applies to pop culture when the financial aspect conceals the artistic one. Being engaged with the best PR-agency does not necessarily mean, everything sells that sounds. Many people keep their taste of music for years, although they are influenced by friends and relatives. This shows that there is something like an individual behavior of people listening to music. And others obviously cannot change this. Nevertheless personal preferences can neither be explained by our individual characters nor individual origins. In this context we have to consider regional music that is spread by media. In times of globalization, regional sounds, also called

“world music” like Roma’s dances, Irish folk music, Japanese *Taiko*, or Persian *Bandari*, become more and more powerful on the international market. Listeners’ interests and global migration support this. The foremost Western influenced media do the same only in the opposite direction. But also new styles like the so-called *Rai* have established lately, combining old as well as new stuff so that the result turns out to be very special to the listener. However, it is true that music has always been composed for a particular audience and it is also true that exactly only this particular audience does listen to this particular kind of music at the end of the day. Regional, cultural and social borders are reflected in different music tastes. This is so especially in pop music. As pop charts have by now become quite homogeneous in their musicality, there has even been introduced a special software by which we are able to guess the quantity of selling new songs in advance. In fact, such a software would not have been developed at all, if there had not been something like a self-made circle of taste and commercialization including the consumer’s taste as well as the sensitivity of the labels.

If we ask ourselves what makes a sound a musical sound, we become aware of a complex network of

economic and social dynamics. Music’s attractiveness really depends on the extent to which it goes over the limits of public attention. Thus music is economically dependent. At the same time it has its roots in culture, a social room that is full of aesthetic expectations and traditions. And this is where music finds its consumer. That, however, means music loses its musicality to that extent as it automatically tries to appeal to the masses. If all styles were combined to just one song, there would not be a postmodern masterpiece that all people liked the same. There would rather be a noisy collection of disparate sounds that have no concept at all. Music is art and art is supposed to be free of any limits. So if art is to represent the world in exactly one spot that, however, is smaller than the World itself and therefore unable to depict the world as a whole, art will no longer be free as there will be limits. In other words: If art means technique, it is definitely one of enlargement not of reduction.

It is possible that music is much more than those characteristics discussed above could ever tell. But there is no doubt about music being firstly the product of a culture. This is where music has its place. Also, in times of global capitalism, it is unfortunately true that music

secondly needs to ensure its economic attractiveness. Moreover does music thirdly depend on regional traditions of which music is made as well as made for. Music can fourthly reflect the individual biography of a listener sometimes. And last not least, the composition as well as the interpretation of music means a real challenge to the music makers' artistic and aesthetic abilities. This complexity is exemplarily reflected in most traditional sometimes a little outdated music theories, institutions or ideas as well as the sound of the used instruments, the location of the performances.

II. Of course, not all sounds are the product of artistic performance. Another but perhaps the more frequent kind of sound is the one of "language." The logics of language obviously follow other rules than those of music for the fact that language is not produced but simply exists (what a strange assertion). If we took the old Greek saying seriously that humans are animals gifted with language, language would be as old as mankind itself. Besides language is always as old as its speaker. Extreme exceptions like the case of Kaspar Hauser show to which extend language has always belonged to our identity, thoughts and our world. Neither human species nor an individual can be imagined without language.

But how does this affect the sound quality of language? By speaking and comprehending we are not interested in phonetics as we would be in making a distinction between harsh German and the soft melody of French. Primarily the sound of a language serves to communicate its meaning. Phonemes—by definition, the smallest sound unit of a language that make a difference in meaning without yet carrying this meaning—constitute syllables, words and sentences. Because comprehension is what counts for the speakers. And the sound of a language is only in so far of "significance" for the meaning of speech as it is building words and sentences. If sentences are incomprehensible in themselves, then speech will fail. In this case we do not automatically start interpreting this foreign language as music, considering it to be well arranged, entertaining or even virtuoso. Accordingly good actresses namely succeed in giving their speech an outstanding, delicately modulated tone. Nonetheless we talk about linguistic genius, if somebody is able to find the right words, but not if he articulates them correctly. The linguistic sound simply responds to other rules than the sound of music.

In the history of music there have always existed separate rules: In Western history starting out with



Pythagorean numbers through the development of polyphony and counterpoint in late Gothic music, the sonata and its special form, the twelve-tone music leading to serial music, the 12-beat sequences of the Blues and the diverse rhythms of contemporary dance music. Nevertheless nobody would contradict the fact that the regulations of a language are many times over those of music. This is, of course, not illustrated by the volume(s) of a grammar book (as musicology would probably fill more grammar books than linguistics). The most important rules of language are not in books but foremost in the words and the knowledge of their use. While in music the 12 tones of the Western scale can be combined in various ways as long as the listener is open for it, the far too arbitrary use of language will soon lead to nonsense. In such a situation, we are left with what we remember when we hear particular words or syllables. It's the dynamics of the speakers and perhaps the expressions in their faces, too, which help us to understand the meaning. But it is not that language we are used to any more.

In this context memory appears to play a crucial role. For if it is true that language simply exists, simply is spoken and simply is used, then only under the condition

that the usage of its words is known. In other words, language is nothing but combining words in complex sentence structures following specific logics. We acquire the language of our parents in early childhood. It is rather late that the infant consciously perceives the language of the environment beyond the family. Unless it is still our mother tongue such languages do not irritate us. Evidence for the power of mother tongue can be found in a foreign-language environment. It is, however, not enough to just speak a language during early childhood. Only permanent speaking practice makes it possible to be as much familiar with our own mother tongue as to be able to feel and think in it in a very complex way. So, it's a never-ending training. Whoever lived in a foreign-language environment knows, how quickly particular features of the own language can be displaced by features of another language. Thus the sound of a language (more than the one of music) shows some local features that cannot be conveyed from one language to another, not even by translation. Old Greek and German, for example, are supposed to be philosophical languages as they show etymological and semantic similarities with words that cannot exactly be distinguished (only think of the two lovely German words: "Gegenwart" and "Habseligkeiten"). According to Banat Swabians,



sensible Romanian cannot be compared with abstract German. And there is also Chinese with its innumerable dialects because of the words sung in different intervals. However this, in Chinese the verb is never conjugated temporarily. In fact, we don't even need to go that far to find semantic as well as syntactic problems in translating languages. Different philosophical language theories have already pointed at differences in meaning even within languages. When a word is used in two different ways, there is not only a change in time but also in meaning. It's a systematical lack of clarity speakers of a language are completely powerless against.

Only few people are able to speak more than one language fluently. Most people speak one, two or perhaps three different languages while often one of those is the speaker's mother tongue that is known by heart (bilingually raised people and highly gifted people constitute the exception). For the extreme complexity of signs, their meanings and the great effort that is needed to learn a lexicon and different sounds, most people manage such a demanding performance only once in their lives and during childhood with the help of special neuron processes. Correspondingly many linguistic sounds are not accessible to us later in life. What we have access to is

the noise of sound, the pitch, the dynamics of sounds as well as mimics and gestures. However, without our word memories, our grammatical skills and the sound of the phonemes, a foreign language would end up as some background noise. Language is much more restricted to national and cultural circumstances, while music can step over the limits without losing its meaning.

III. So piece by piece we went from special to the more and more ordinary sounds: Broadly speaking, from the baroque concert hall to the noisy fairground. Actually the more ordinary the sounds are, the more familiar they appear to us. Indeed, neither music nor language makes the most frequent sounds, which come to our ears. More often we deal with noises of our environment like cars beneath the windows, the telephone ringing, our breath or footsteps on the wooden floor. Also from time to time, our bones make funny noises, too, or paper is rustling when the pages of a book are turned, doors creak when people go around the flat. And even in silence, we can listen to our blood pulsating through our ears.

Field recordings—the genre of sound storage medium—was established only very recently. It deals with the

most ordinary sounds which often turn out to be the most “unfamiliar” to us for the fact that we just became used to them and therefore do not realize or hear them anymore. What the tone is for music and the sound for language, the noise is for field recordings. It is its smallest unit of sound. But how big are the differences between them? The audio frequencies of a chromatic scale are exactly defined in their 440 hertz distance of concert pitch “A.” The interaction of them forms intervals, keys and whole systems of sound. A language like German knows phones, phonemes, letters and graphemes. Those are used to create syllables, words, phrases, sentences and after all whole texts. And what is the noise of field recordings for? Well, it’s just a noise that is able to vary. So this noise can actually be some kind of a murmur, a quiet click, a scratching, a growl or a hum, a sharpening, a beating, a swinging, a vibration, a trembling, a clinking, a dabbling or a whizzing. Now let’s look at the original version of field recordings because it is the best way to see what makes field recordings so special. The more the original is influenced by any arrangements, the more do field recordings equal the sound of music. Even though the distance between an arranged dog’s barking and a traditional string quartet seems to be extremely invincible.

Original field recordings tape the momentary noise of a place. The places can either be familiar or unfamiliar while the noises of those places most of the time sound familiar even though they come from another part of the World. It is really fascinating that people still identify, for example, a train station only because of its noises without ever having been to that place. In this respect, field recordings function like familiar languages, which we remember just because of their sounds. So we learn that field recordings actually have semantic quality. Here there is another similarity to the sounds of a language. In contrast to spoken language, its origins or parents do not determine the meaning of noise. Field recordings step over regional borders and thus show similarities with music again. And if there is an intended aspect of semantics on the one hand, there has to be, considering its variety of sounds, an extended aesthetic quality on the other hand. The latter is supposed to be the base of field recording’s musicality.

Well, although the original version of field recordings shows similarities with music and language, it does not take the position between them. Field recordings make an own genre. In their semantics and aesthetics they are different to linguistic as well as musical

sounds. So let's stay with "semantics" now: Which semantic structures do field recordings deal with? For the fact that field recordings are not exactly made but instead recorded, selected and adapted from the environment, they always have the environment as an instance to refer to. Therefore most listeners try to find out the original places of the records. They start guessing but unfortunately, that is like using the paintings of constructivism as a decorative pattern on a tablecloth or curtain. However, much more important than the recognition of field recordings is their origin. Coming from a real context, field recordings are partially coincidental. That means, field recordings are both the product of themselves as well as the product of an artist. The artist's influence on field recordings is, however, restricted to the location of the microphone, the lengths of the tape, the volume, the alignment and possibly the touch up of the whole recording in the end. So this is what the artist can do. But the actual source of the noise is not coincidental only. Perhaps we can say it is coincidental at second rate because the sound is not quite purposely arranged at the moment of recording (while performances make the exceptions here).

Now what about the aesthetics of a non-manipulated noise? In our context, aesthetics means arrangement, construction or regular order while its literal meaning is composition or compilation. The composer or artist arranges the tones in intervals, bars and motifs. It is the same with a speaker who takes syllables in order to create words, sentences and whole texts. Field recordings offer two varieties which gradually differ from each other. On the one hand, it can be done without any special effects like cutting or percolations so that it is kept in its original form. On the other hand, the noises can be arranged to short samples which can be used as some raw material for any kind of music. But the latter does not exactly match the idea of field recordings at all. From the purist point of view, the aesthetics of field recordings seems to be coincidental. Listening to them twice offers various rhythms and melodies (or fragments of melody) of the acoustic world we live in. Not having any visual aspects, field recordings only deal with the noise as such. Thus the acoustic dimension of meaning appears to be quite complex. Actually, the aesthetics of field recordings is formed by our music experiences made by interpreting rhythms and melodies into everyday sounds. Those sounds are kept by a sound storage medium to be spread just like from a magnifying glass.

On the other hand, field recordings offer a new way of listening. They help to expand the range of familiar sound qualities by using unfamiliar sound patterns. In this way the pure composition of music is supplemented by completely new ideas.

Celebrating the mixture of both familiar as well as unfamiliar sounds make field recordings appear to be a very own genre. They can neither be exclusively compared with linguistics nor with music. For instance, in contrast to music, field recordings are independent from economic, generic or commercial circumstances. And in comparison with language they are not restricted to a specific community like a language is to a language community. In other words field recordings are likely to remind us of language for the fact that they call for memories but also develop structures of meaning. But field recordings are crossing the borders of strict local language communities by involving all people just the way music does. If all of this is true and field recordings are universal in their semantics, there is no doubt about a political aspect of field recordings, a presupposition I will deal with in part two of this text.

SM—September 2006



Tanja Hemm

LOCATION, SOUND, LISTENER, LISTENING  
THOUGHTS ON SITE SPECIFIC SOUND INSTALLATION  
*Translation by Tanja Hemm*

**Tanja Hemm** (born 1965 in Bayreuth, Germany), musical education, several instruments; M.A. American Literature/Theater (oral traditions/radio dramaturgy) at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg 1994; worked as a writer (1989–1999) with the written/spoken word and sound (radio documentary, radio play, literature); worked and lived in the U.S., New Zealand and Australia, today based in Nuremberg, Germany; since 2002 focused on site specific sound installations in public and private spaces; member of the *Verband der Schriftsteller*, the *European Forum Klanglandschaft* and the *GEDOK München*.



Every location has unique acoustic, architectural and everyday features. These features influence and shape each other, produce or host everyday sounds which essentially characterize a location. A site specific sound installation works with existing sounds and the uniqueness of the location that arises out of the local features. The answer to the question which of the sounds to be installed will carry rhythm and frequencies of the location best, which sound combinations or compositions will transport the dynamic of the location best lies in the homework done before the actual composing can

begin. Watching the location and checking it acoustically—again and again. Obviously every sound can be installed technically speaking on every location, but—not every sound works in collaboration with every location. A location has its biography and secrets.

A site specific sound composition can be atmospheric or very simple, one or multiple tracked, static or moving around the location. The emphasis during the selection of the sounds (natural sounds, instrumental sounds, every day sounds and/or voice/text work) lies in the



intensity the sound produces in collaboration with the location; not in a perfect acoustic appearance only. All sounds are produced and worked with in mono quality. Mono sounds are very clear and straight forward and thus very immediate and intense. They perfectly represent the origin of a sound. Every sound comes into existence as a mono sound. It is the fact that we perceive this sound with two ears that makes it a stereo sound. Experience shows that even outstanding stereo recordings mostly have one track that has a higher clarity and intensity than the other.

The sound installation develops between composition, location and listener. Preferably the speakers or players are positioned so that they create a diffuse sound picture and the listener cannot or only hardly locate the source of the sound. Consequently the whole location becomes sound space instead of being reduced to a one point of sound production. Meeting the site specific sound installation the listener can redefine and sharpen his perception for the location and for his own listening habits. The principle of chance that we know from recordings in nature we meet here in the individual listening/location biography of the listener. It determines how he reacts to a specific sound or location. Site spe-

cific sound mirrors the relationship of a listener to his own auditive perception and audio biography as well as his affinity to specific locations and sounds and their importance for his every day life.

I think of the astonishment, excitement and irritation of the visitors of a public toilet when they meet voice, natural sounds or instrumental sounds from the “Klangnetz öffentliche Toilette” (sound net public toilet), I think of the installation “Stillstand” (standstill) with its high and playful frequencies in the garden and the lower bassy instrumental sounds in the yard of the Museum Tucherschloss and the groups of listeners that established themselves in the one or the other area, I think of the whispering bushes in the installation “Geschwindigkeit” (celerity) and the longing of the listeners to discover the secret content. I think of the dog from the store next-door who came repeatedly visiting the installation “inbetween” in the Maximilianshöfe in Munich in order to follow the voices that were echoing through the room in order to finally position himself right where all the moving sounds met, I think of the ducks that every time the sound started came swimming to their little island in the Pegnitz next to the Spitalbrücke in order to settle, and I think of the birds which love to participate in

sound checks and watch what I am doing in their space. I think of the cheerfulness and the panic on the faces of the visitors of the Hotelbunker and its installation in Nuremberg and I think of the visitors of the *art.fair* in Cologne, who entered the fair grounds passing underneath a gloomy railroad bridge smiling at the human Mouthsounds that accompanied them. And I think of all the sounds that just by chance took part in the installations. Every installations' sound is leveled to the average situation of the location. If the loudness of the location rises or falls the installation does as well.

I anchor sounds into a location. The listener perceives the location with his ears or experiences it as a broad sound space: new, diverse and individual. If the listener has the possibility to meet the installation repeatedly, the site specific sound experience can grow in its effect. Interestingly often there is an associative-emotional transcription done by the listener: he often hears the composition he listens to in two locations at once. First in the specific location where the installation is installed and second at a place out of his own individual life-biography of locations. If he has the chance to actually install the composition at "his biographical location" it will always be connected with the original location of

the installation and the listeners first time experience. Site specific sound brings our focus back to locations and locating.

TH—2007





Aaron Ximm

**SOUND, ART, MUSIC?**

SEARCHING FOR A PERSONAL AESTHETIC

*Translation by Daniel M. Schiller*



Photo: Bronwyn Ximm

**Aaron Ximm** is a San-Francisco-based field recordist and sound artist. He is best known for his composition, installation, and performance work as *Quiet American*, much of which can be found at [quietamerican.org](http://quietamerican.org). From 2001 to 2005, Aaron curated the *Field Effects* concert series, which, like his own work, sought to showcase the quiet, fragile, and lovely side of sound art. Along with his wife Bronwyn, Aaron produces the occasionally popular *One Minute Vacation* podcast.

### Conundrums

The more I know what I'm doing, the less certain I am of what I am.

The more I know where I am, the less certain I am of where to go.

What am I?

I don't know what I am or what I want to be.

I know what I do. I make field recordings and I work with them in different ways.

More specifically, I listen to sounds in the world and record some of them. I present my recordings unedited, I collage them, I manipulate them, and I arrange them to make compositions. I use them to make installations and sound sculpture. I perform with them, sometimes in novel ways.

I observe myself playing different roles when doing each of these things. In one role, I indulge a sentiment-

tal predilection for meticulously making lovely things. In another, I execute exercises in compositional theory without concern for the artifacts that result from rigid adherence to form. In another, I perform an ephemeral gesture that persists only through secondary documentation.

Though I describe all these things as “sound art,” I believe they come from different places. Using my own peculiar definitions, I consider some of my roles to be about the creation of “music,” some of “art” proper, and some of “sound art,” which is neither of those things as I understand them. I believe these things appear as modestly coherent and contiguous with each other as they do simply because I am their common origin.

When I say that I play different roles I mean, in addition to obvious differences in process and product, that I use different language to explain what I am doing, and that I think in terms appropriate to its discourse. In one role, I would say that I compose soundscapes. In another, that I am a phonographer. In another, that I am a composer and that I make music out of field recordings. In yet another, that I am an artist whose material is the sound endemic to particular places.

Perhaps I should start saying that I work in the sound arts, plural?

When asked to label myself, I simply say that I am a “sound artist.” It is the most broadly true of the obvious choices, but I have fixed on it mostly because of its inherent ambiguity: in my experience, “sound art” is used more as a catch-all term of convenience than to pick out specific practices and work. Like “electronic music,” “sound art” can mean anything from very slightly “experimental” popular music to a very highly experimental conceptual art installation or performance art piece. Even its practitioners habitually gloss over the very different things people are working with and toward under the rubric (perhaps because the community is still small enough, even in superset, that subdivision feels unhelpful).

Ambiguity has its advantages; for one, under its shelter I have been free to work in widely different ways without seeming to be entirely a dilettante. Yet using it I also have a lingering unease; the label “sound artist” comes (at least when unconsidered) with neither a clear theoretical framework nor a well-defined community of practice to support my growth as an artist.

If I could do it, I imagine it would be a relief to instead produce work within a single discourse and within a single community of practice. Choosing to become a “musician” (say) would suggest a form for my practice and constrain the forms my work might take. It would clarify who my community of peers was—and to whom, then, I should turn for a consensus valuation of my efforts. As a vetted member of a particular tradition, it would hopefully be easier to find an audience and a critical community. (It would lift the burden of having broad options; to be constrained is also to be focused.)

If I had trained professionally as a musician or as an artist, I would not have to make that choice; I would know what I was. Absent that training, such a commitment—to be one thing—is one I can’t convince myself to make yet.

The primary reasons for my hesitation are easy to identify:

I am a practitioner of an ill-defined hybrid art form like “sound art” partially because I am too catholic in my interests to let my work with sound, narrow as it already is, settle within a single of its component disciplines.

I am a modern multitasker: I have a short attention span, but I gain insight from unexpected analogies and triangulations when I swap projects.

I am susceptible to the gravity (or charisma) of other people. Especially when I am inspired by someone’s work, I absorb their ideas, interests, and assumptions. I empathize with whomever I am around and take on roles that befit the moment: sometimes I identify with (become) someone; sometimes I become the “other” against which they may be defined. Within its moment each identity appeals, but though most identities touch on truths about my own work and interests, none encompasses the range of things I am interested in (which otherwise seems so modest).

Yet I can’t blame social malleability for the fluctuating nature of my work, as most of it is done in isolation. Even when traveling with companions, I record alone. I compose alone. I perform alone. When working I am alone with my own conflicting instincts and inclinations, and it is those things that keep me ambivalating. (Of course, I am surrounded by puppets that persist as caricatures of whomever I have most recently read or listened to...)

And as I will discuss below, I also believe that there is an ambiguity inherent in field recordings (and hence in phonographic practice) that naturally leads me, when working with different recordings, to different ends.

My problem is not that I don't know any direction in which I would like to go with field recordings. I would characterize it the opposite way: I remain interested in (too?) many of the possibilities that I see for them.

This essay has its origin in my desire to know what I should be doing with myself. It is a recounting of my navel-gazing quest for self-definition.

This is not purely an exercise in ego satisfaction. As I will expand on below, I do believe there are consequences for not knowing where I am heading.

### **What I have been Doing**

Most obviously, and unsurprisingly, my drift—between identities, between ways of working, between ways of thinking about working—means that my work is in flux. It refuses to settle into a “voice.”

To render this concretely, I would like to describe several recent projects of mine. In particular I would like to describe why I feel that each is situated in a different artistic discourse, though they are all based on field recordings.

Each project differs from the others not just in “sound” but in conception, methodology, and results. In one I believe I used recordings to make music, one to make “sound art,” and one to make “art”—I use those terms as I have come to define them.

Through such differences these projects recapitulate the changes in my thinking about sound as I better learned how the work I was doing fit (and did not fit) into a succession of artistic frameworks. They reveal the changes in my work as I grew more aware of myself as an artist working in a medium with its own multidimensional history. They document how both my “sophistication” and my uncertainty have grown over the years.

It is not for me to say whether any of the roles I have played—musician, sound artist, artist—is more noble or valuable than the others. But I do think it is reasonable to say that there is a philosophical evolution occurring

when I progress from thinking about sound as a musician, to thinking about it as a sound artist, to thinking about it as an artist. Each stage introduces undeniably a clarifying context for the concerns of the discipline that preceded it, and adds concerns of its own. This is the evolution I feel myself to have been making over the past ten years, and it is the one that I wish to recount here. Whether such an evolution is desirable or inevitable is another topic. (I realize evolution is a freighted term.)

Articulating these changes is my goal for this essay.

It bears saying that I don't believe my thoughts on these matters are particularly profound, subtle, or original, but they are mine. They are a mental shorthand I use, necessarily simplifying but also as true to my experience as I can make them.

Being specific to my experience, though, I ignore and elide over equally natural ways of working with sound (or in sound art) outside of my own experience—for example, within of the context of performance art, or body art (I am thinking of Daniel Menche), or sculpture, or architecture. I omit consideration of related practices like sound design, radio art, scientific and documen-

tary (e.g. nature) recording, and academic (traditional acoustic-ecological and acoustimatic) soundscape composition.

Similarly, I omit conundrums extending to related domains, e.g. my unresolved feelings about acoustic ecology. I omit orthogonal concerns such as the technologies and techniques (and their consequences) I apply in field recording, the different forms my work takes, and the different relationships it negotiates with its environment.

For that matter, I omit any real discussion of what I am interested in accomplishing as an artist, or why I believe art (of any kind) is the appropriate mechanism for me; I do not treat of (relatively) contemporary concerns such as the tenuous nature of my agency and the way that this discussion presupposes it and the existence of my rock-solid ego.

What I do instead is write as an autodidact, as I attempt to come to terms with my own changing thinking about the nature and value of what I do as an artist—in particular, as an artist working with field recordings.

## Making Music

The first piece I would like to discuss is *Guantánamo Express*, a long-form composition commissioned by Matt Smith for a *Kunstradio* series he curated called “Radio Roadmovie.” The piece was broadcast last spring and recently posted on my website.

The piece is a forty-minute soundscape weaving many recordings I made in Cuba. All of the sound in the piece is either straight field recording or manipulations thereof; all of the sound was recorded either en route to or in the town of Guantánamo. The surface subject of the piece is the trip my wife and I took to the town in the company of two Cuban musicians, Jesús Ávila Gainza and his brother Julio, to visit their families.

The piece is structured as a series of vignettes, alternating between relatively naturalistic soundscapes, almost untreated recordings of the musicians (or members of their families) singing and performing, and overtly “composed” moments compressing many obviously manipulated recordings into a dense euphony. There is no explicit narrative arc as such, and no narration as in my previous long-form piece, *Annapura: Memories in Sound*;

but a story can be inferred, and as in that piece, my wife and I are present as “characters,” as are the musicians the piece is both about and for.

I want to discuss *Guantánamo* because making it for me was a self-conscious exercise in the sort of impressionist “sound collage” I gravitated to when I began working with field recordings almost ten years ago. In a sense it was an intentional indulgence in my nostalgia for that sort of work.

I say “nostalgia” because while I will never tire of making such work, the sensibility behind it feels naive to me now, and perhaps artistically (if not technically) unambitious. In such work I indulge a love of frankly “musical” pleasures that I have, if not exactly come to view with suspicion, certainly come to identify with a sense of social and artistic conservatism and pursuit of the “merely” voluptuous. In such work there is a gratuitous display of craft and a love of purely sensory pleasures that I believe is out of fashion in the “serious” art world (if never the popular one).

Sound work of the type I call “musical” privileges the aspects of sound that are easiest to relate to, sometimes



at the expense of others that might be more significant by other metrics (what is unfashionable is to do so sans irony). In the language of my critics real and imagined, it is the very pleasures offered by such work that leave it susceptible to becoming (if mostly unintentionally) bourgeois, Orientalist, colonialist, and sentimental. (Some of these charges originate in my habit of working with field recordings made while traveling in other cultures, a topic to discuss elsewhere.)

Though I hope all my work poses serious questions, a work like this poses them quite quietly. What it does loudly is please. Even when on the surface esoteric or avant-garde, work like this is arguably “pop” at core.

Allow me to digress into a bit of relevant personal history.

From the beginning I have made music and called it “sound art.”

When I started making field recordings in the late '90s, I knew what I wanted to do with them in the abstract, but I had no idea how that would actually sound. I distinctly remember describing to Leonard Lombardo (whose microphones I use) that I intended to “compose”

with field recordings. What that meant in terms of process and where that would lead in terms of results, I had no idea. (I often work by committing to what feels like a winning concept, trusting that I will find something worthwhile in its execution.)

I had little context and no training for what I was doing when I began working with my recordings on a digital audio workstation, but luckily I did some things right. Having recognized that I worked well within constraints, I found a good one: to work with the recordings I made as a sole source material. (Making work about a place using only its recorded sounds still has a great philosophical appeal: as my old hero Walter Benjamin might have granted, I thereby work with something more like symbol than allegory.)

So constrained, I found my way forward by trial and error: I listened to one sound, to one sound looped, to sounds layered, to sounds processed in this way and that. Doors opened as I discovered what my tools could do; they closed according to what seemed the natural source of judgment: my ears. What pleased them I kept; what displeased them I discarded.



Doing so, I unwittingly adopted a second constraint I was not aware of immediately.

What do you suppose would please my ears? At the time I was mostly ignorant of the application of field recording in “real” music, by which you can guess I mean academic or “classical” music. I was effectively ignorant of *musique concrète* and its descendents, including “soundscape composition,” as it is known in acoustic ecology (and related) circles.

I was slightly less ignorant of the applications of field recording in real music, by which you can guess I mean the music that I and my friends listened to, most importantly the pop canon. I had noticed the snippets of sound used in *Atom Heart Mother* and in Depeche Mode (and most memorably, Slavek Kwi’s contribution to Laila Amezian’s *Initial*). Thanks to my older brother’s benevolent influence, my horizons had opened; I attended underground industrial noise concerts, and I heard Zoviet France and Nurse With Wound. I listened to whomever I could find that used field recordings in their work, toy.bizarre and then Francisco López.

Which brings me to a defining encounter I had with the latter. I doubt he remembers it, but I gave him a copy of my first album and he graciously offered feedback. Something he said almost in passing was that what I was making was really pop music.

How could my “sound collages” be pop music, I fretted; I had believed I was making sound art.

Yet he was correct. The aesthetic that drove the decisions I was making was the one that defined the music I’d listened to all my life. Listening to *Three Trains*, a track from that era that is still my most “popular” piece, I clearly hear the architecture (not to mention the timbres, harmonies, and beats) of the music I grew up with.

It is no surprise that I would seek first to please my ears. In music what survive are mostly variations on a stable core of euphony. Most people listen to what pleases their ears and bodies and the pre-conceptual emotional mind. What I get complimented on by people outside my own esoteric community—by normal people, that is—are my undeniably musical works. (I assume this is a universal experience for people who work in fields derided as “difficult listening.”)

I see no point in fighting this “euphonitropism,” but as there are other ways to work with sound, I find it helpful to define this one. I use “music” to mean sound that works without theory: sound that is rooted in universals that satisfy us at levels that precede culture. (Three-on-two, pentatonic scales—I wouldn’t hesitate to call these universal; I assume they are deeply defined by our own evolved embodied circumstances. Though I do think attention makes something art, I do not think attention will make anything music. If we ever meet aliens, I will be curious to learn what, if anything, they use for music, and what they think of ours.)

It is a pleasant surprise that despite the immense terrain already known to conventional music, innovation and discovery in “musical” sound art do not seem notably constrained—no more than one cuisine forecloses on another.

In *Guantánamo Express* much of what I would describe as “musical” is obviously so, partly because on one level the piece is a portrait of musicians. Most blatantly I include within it unmodified recordings of music in its conventional sense. Almost as obviously I construct euphonic passages by quoting musical sounds directly. I incorpo-

rate everyday sounds with musical properties such as trains and the clip-clop of passing horses. I construct rhythmical figures from interesting snippets of various recordings. And so on. (The results, their origins in field recordings notwithstanding, make sense as music to almost everyone.)

But I believe that the piece is also musical in ways that derive uniquely from the use of field recordings as a medium. In particular, I believe that there are aspects of arbitrary sounds and soundscapes—sound that until recently was dismissed as “noise” in the derogatory sense—that work on us at something very like the visceral level that traditional musical materials do, as directly that is—albeit through different mechanisms.

It is unsurprising that we should still be discovering compositional materials (and the forms that arise from them, etc.) that work without theory: our vocabulary has expanded into a dimension that was unavailable until recently, after all.

Composition is (tautologically) constrained by the range of sounds (and their properties) that we can produce, control, or affect, and by the limits of our ability to

transfer or encode (inscribe) those things. Liberated from (in fact, confounding) the requirement to encode (as in a score) or perform, recording technology magnifies the range of possible compositional elements—in my experience to results that surpass the possibilities thus far demonstrated by synthetic electronic music, which are after all limited to human ingenuity and patience. The lyrical way of saying this is that the world becomes an instrument.

Though field recordings extend the range of textures and timbres available to composers by virtue of the sonic complexity of the world that they document, it is through their intrinsic capacity to represent that field recordings most dramatically add to the musical vocabulary. When one works with a field recording, emotional (and to a lesser extent, structural) vectors may derive not only from its sonic qualities but also from the associations evoked by recognizable subjects.

If the representational qualities of field recordings are a contribution to the musical vocabulary, though, they remain merely musical qualities to the extent that they are pre-conceptual and pre-narrative—i.e. that they work on a purely associational emotional level (representation

does allow for culturally specific associations that constrain universality, of course). Though they may operate on us in novel ways, the outcome of those operations is familiar: familiar enough that there is even a commercial market for recordings that work on us in this (associational) way—I am thinking of \$2 supermarket collections featuring the sound of (often artificial) fires, rain, streams, forests, etc. A market, alas, larger than the one for the more “artistic” applications of field recordings.

As I will discuss below, the effects field recordings have at the conceptual or narrative level I would call extra-musical.

(Incidentally, as I will also mention below, a trope field recording composers—myself included—seem to commonly discover quickly is the compelling dissonance that results when the sound and significance of a recording are at odds with each other, e.g. as when a musically lovely sound is produced by a conceptually terrible thing. Because the location of this dissonance is beyond the simply associational and into the conceptual, I consider this to be a extra-musical effect: I consider it to be an artistic one. To bring up Francisco López again, I interpret his notion of the “absolute concrete” as, among

other things, a more confrontational and abstract variation on this theme: he presents us with the uncertain pleasure derived from field-recorded sound received ritually stripped of its capacity to signify and hence of almost all associational affect; he intentionally provokes us with almost-familiarity. In López's work of this type, I believe he uses sonic materials primarily to reemphasize that process of "dislocation"—and not, as it may seem, to simply study those denatured materials themselves; hence he crosses into what I would call sound art or beyond: simply to art.)

You will have noticed my recurrent use of the word "mere." So: what's wrong with making music with field recordings?

There is nothing wrong with making music: in making sound art that originates in the musical instinct and its habits, and that works first, mainly, or only, on a musical level. In fact, it pleases me greatly to discover new modes of making sound "work." And to repeat myself, it is a fact that the experimental forms general audiences respond to readily are the ones that are the least radical in their rejection of known pleasures—however doused in the rhetoric of rupture and re-appropriation they are.

What I want to avoid, however, is making music without the awareness that that is what I am doing, or with the pretense of calling it sound art simply because I am working with new materials. Likewise, I would rather not make sound art (especially, bad sound art) and claim that it is music.

So many of the overt trappings of sound art (field recording-based and otherwise) are derived and appropriated from (or imposed by) the world of music that it remains hard for me to always tease them apart.

But I do believe that the concerns of many sound artists are genuinely distinct from those of musicians, even the ones making musical sound art. (As I will get to, it is certainly the case that the interests of the larger art world lie elsewhere these days.)

Working with sound to make music, I developed such concerns myself.

### **Making Sound Art**

The second piece I would like to discuss is *Kagbeni Variations*, a two-part project completed in 2004. It

consists of an unedited twenty-minute recording and a collection of thirty-two “variations” I composed using that recording as my sole source material.

The source recording documents a festival celebrating the birth of the Buddha that my wife and I encountered on our honeymoon in the medieval town of Kagbeni, high in the Jomsom Valley in the Annapurna region of the Nepalese Himalayas. Instructions ask that the source recording be listened to at least once before the variations.

The titular “variations” are process-exercise compositions a few minutes long. Each “investigates” a short excerpt—typically a few seconds—from the source recording, disassembling it through one or more procedural editing mechanisms, which I carried out by hand. Most of the procedures I performed involved permutations on the conceit of looping (though none simply loops). Looping is a process I have a troubled relationship with, finding it seductively effective at recontextualizing field recordings but also terribly tired, in both my own and others’ work. This project is in one sense a record of an attempt to come to terms with looping, if temporarily.

I conceived and executed several hundred different strategies (recipes) for variations; the variations that together best illustrated the range of ideas I covered were reduced to a set of thirty-two, divided between two groups: simple variations, in which I applied only a single manipulative strategy, and complex variations, in which I combined two or more strategies.

For reasons that I will describe in a moment, a key criterion I used to select variations for the final set was that the collection taken together should support (ideally encourage) repeated listening; with this requirement in mind, I favored variations that were musical enough (in the sense described above) to hold the attention of the average listener.

Musicality was not itself the goal for this project, but it was a precondition for it. It was a “garden path,” intended to appeal to the listener and therefore distract her while I achieved a less obvious objective. (A similar motivation determined my choice of source recording in the first place: I chose something that would attract enough interest, as a “fascinating document of an exotic locale and event,” to stimulate interest in the project as a whole.)



Taken individually, each variation was intended to work on three levels. It was meant to reveal the complexity of and beauty latent in arbitrary moments of soundscape, to document the strengths and weakness of simple looping-like techniques for “excavating” sound recordings, and, almost as if as a side effect, to familiarize the listener’s ear with specific moments of the source recording through repeated exposure.

The latter, though inevitable, is actually the most important for my purposes. My intention was that (taken collectively) the variations alter the listener’s relationship to the source recording.

Because the variations obsessively repeat specific moments within the source recording, listeners should discover that the latter can no longer be heard naively as a monolithic recording. Instead, once the listener’s ear “learns” the variations, the source recording should be punctuated by regular moments of attention-catching familiarity—and because of the repetitive nature of the ritual documented and various recurring elements in the background soundscape, peppered with tantalizingly near-familiar moments as well.

*Kagbeni* is meant to demonstrate the premise that arbitrary moments of sound can become as familiar as conventional melodies through simple repetition—and ever-after reliably catch the attention of the ear, as melodies do. (Ear-worms can be made by brute force, in other words; or, “all the world’s a jingle.”)

(The original inspiration for this project was my own early experience manipulating field recordings; I found that working with recordings in my studio reliably altered my relationship to previously quotidian sounds. Encountering sound similar to what I was working with in the wild, my ear would instantly trip and I would snap into a state of high attention to what I was hearing. Even as I wrote this essay, I worked on a short track whose primary constituent recording contains a moment of incidental sound very similar to one in one of the *Kagbeni* variations; as if to prove my own point, every time I hear it, I am instantly reminded of the similar moment in the variation. I am sure this experience is familiar to anyone who has tried to learn to identify birdsongs from recordings.)

It is my hope that the listener comes to recognize that (and why) this has occurred. The listener’s experience of

her attention fixing more or less consciously on particular moments of sound, only to relax and drift until the next such fixation, is at the heart of the work—as is the listener’s experience of becoming self-conscious about this very pattern.

That experience is where I would locate the work; the sound is just the vehicle. That moment is the art; sound is just the enabling (if mandatory) medium.

I consider *Kagbeni Variations* to be one of my most accomplished works of “sound art” to date.

What makes it “sound art” for me is the role sound plays in the work: it is the relationship that its constituent sound has to the “place” I believe the essential artistic experience occurs (when it does). In this work sound is vehicle and source, but the primary artistic experience is one about sound, not (only) one (only) of it.

As I said above, I do think the piece is musical; I intended it to be, and it must be to succeed by my own terms. But it is musical while doing something I cannot help but think of as more-than: it is about something. It strives to articulate something in addition to its own sound

and their effects. For me, when sound is less simply itself than about itself—beyond the way music might be said to be “about” its own qualities or (those of) other music—it moves beyond the “merely” musical; it becomes (or at least acquires qualities of) “sound art.”

When I say “about,” I mean by demonstration as much as any means of signification. If *Kagbeni Variations* provokes the listener into a (more) self-conscious engagement with her own process of listening, it is not just doing something, it is demonstrating something. It is not about the musical pleasures found in the variations themselves, even though it is only on account of those pleasures that it succeeds; it is about the experience of those pleasures (and what that experience does to the listener).

Of course, the psychology (etc.) of the perception of sound is just one recurring concern—a central “topic,” if you will—of sound art.

Another is the way things sound (in both the active and passive senses): objects (including traditional instruments), people (the way sound is produced within and by the body), animals, plants, the places, spaces, events of the world.

Yet another concern is the way that sound can (and comes to) signify and act, in limited ways (soundmarks) or broad ways (as language, or as cues that shape our eco-socio-political-psycho-geographies). For example, much of the noise I see performed as sound art is “about” power, particularly control and domination—though in this case there is usually less thought than reaction, as far I can tell; I am sick of artists regurgitating the very unpleasant structures they allegedly critique.

And so on.

All of these are obsessions of phonography, of course, once it progresses beyond merely musical subjects and merely musical effects. Field recordings’ capacities for narrative—the representational aspect they have that goes beyond pre-conceptual associations—make them a natural instrument for sound art; phonography is, of course, the main avenue to exploring the sound of “events.” Work of mine that emphasizes this capacity is often described as cinematic. (In *Kagbeni*, I might say that the source recording is sound art itself in this sense: it is a cropped record of how a place and time in the world sounded, through my gear, from my positions, at a particular moment.)

Of course, most sound work (with field recordings and without) operates on more than one level. There is a fine fuzzy line between being interested in (and making work about) the musical qualities of sound, and simply using those qualities to make music.

But I would still go so far as to say that when sound work makes concerns such as these primary, when it is “about” sound in these ways, then it is sound art.

I’m aware that such a definition annexes work that would be described by its own creator as music, but I have found this distinction useful nonetheless; I might somewhat slyly suggest that what fails as music by music’s own traditional metrics could be situated instead as successful as sound art.

Extrapolating from this point, I believe that our terminology can and should evolve, if consensually, in precisely this direction. Sound art should be clearly defined as something distinct from music.

For one thing, many sound artists come from backgrounds (and speak languages) other than the musical; e.g. they come to sound through architecture, science, sculpture.

But ultimately the important thing is that such distinctions, especially those that are relatively easy to point to in the world, can be used to clarify the ways we use and engage with sound that are relatively new and distinct from older art forms. The point of this essay, after all, is that redefining and refining my terms has helped me understand real differences in how my peers and I work with sound. A broader adoption of such distinctions would encourage us to collectively evolve appropriate mechanisms for how sound art is presented, distributed, evaluated, discussed—even bought and sold.

As you might suspect, I'm not interested in the commonly espoused (in my experience) contrary position that phonography, that sound art, that all "organized sound," is music. As far as I'm concerned, such a broadening of terminology is either tautological or false; such notions undermine our collective effort as sound artists to evolve new relationships to sound beyond the traditions of music. To call sound art music is as unhelpful as calling music art. (An instrumental definition of music as "that which musicians make and agree is music, within their own discourse," though not as useful in my own thinking as the one I employ above, "sound that works," is still better than one that annexes what I am calling sound art.)

Phonography—and since I'm being particular about terminology, perhaps I should clarify that I mean the making and presentation of essentially unedited field recordings, and not compositions made from them or manipulations thereof—occupies an intriguingly ambiguous position. To state the obvious, depending on its subject and the nature and context of its presentation, a field recording can be music, can be sound art, can be both, can be made into either, perhaps can be made neither.

As I mentioned, many of the recordings of mine that people respond to are what I would call quite musical—for example, my recording of donkey trains leaving Marpha, Nepal. Some of my own favorites include recordings that are quite unmusical, whose significance derives from what they mean, not from how they sound—for example, my recording of the Harichandra "burning ghat" in Varanasi. The difference in how I appreciate each of these types of recordings is the difference between musical phonography and phonography as sound art.

I have speculated that it is the potential to be (and become) both music and sound art within phonographs themselves that has encouraged me (more and less

consciously) to take different projects in different directions. I know for certain that this openness is what has encouraged me to continue working with field recordings as single-mindedly as I have.

Possibly this ambiguity at the heart of the practice of phonography helped lead me into my current existential confusion. If nothing else, I think it partially explains the conflicting ideas people in the phonographic community have voiced about what they are doing.

If such an ambiguity increased my confusion, though, it does not fully account for it. For the past few years I have been thinking a lot about yet a third potential in field recordings as well, which I believe is as yet largely unrealized: with field recordings one can make not just music, not just sound art, but art—unqualified by that diminutive “sound”—as well.

### **Making Art**

The final piece I would like to discuss is a small but personally significant project I executed a few months ago while vacationing on the Mayan Riviera in southern Mexico.

Named *Flotsam Resonance #1*, the project is dedicated to and was inspired by Toshiya Tsunoda—specifically, by his recordings made from within tubs and bottles, such as those that appear on his Extract from *Field Recording Archive #2: The Air Vibration Inside a Hollow*. These investigate the way objects “sound” in both the active and passive senses, within themselves and within their surroundings. (As such, they’re perfect examples of what I consider sound art proper.)

While in the Yucatan, my wife and I stayed at an “ecotel” in the Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve south of Tulum that is administered by the *Centro Ecológico Sian Ka’an* (CESiaK). The latter is a nonprofit responsible for the creation and expansion of the biosphere, and famous for its work protecting sea turtles. Most of that work is done on the coast’s long beaches, which while shockingly lovely are suffering: they are regularly inundated with trash floating in on the current—so much trash that our instinctive efforts to help, by collecting bags full of detritus, while appreciated, were worse than useless.

When we suggested that hotel guests could be encouraged to collect trash, the center’s director told us that this was a frequent suggestion, but that it was impractic-



cal not only because of the unrelenting tide of garbage washing ashore, but because there is no reliable trash collection system to disappear it; any trash that is collected just piles up.

I was intrigued to learn that the center has amassed a library of interesting trash, which indicates that it came not only from the obvious suspects—cruise ships regularly dumping waste overboard; the ill-managed growth up the coast at Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum—but from all over the world: from the U.S. of course, from South America, even from Australia, Asia and the Arabian Gulf. Hearing this, I was reminded of reports of floating “trash islands” as big as American states collecting in the open ocean.

Finding the beach freshly littered with new flotsam one morning, I made a pair of simultaneous field recordings as follows. The first was made by inserting the very small capsules of my Core Sound HEB microphones into two glass bottles that had washed up (an admission: I relocated one of them to achieve approximate human ear separation between the bottles). The second was a conventional near-binaural recording I made with my Sonic Studios DSM mics (which, as always, I wore on my head).

As I had hoped, the recording made within the bottles is quite interesting as a phonograph. While clearly audible and identifiable, the surf and wind I heard on the beach are strongly filtered by the shape and volume of each bottle, with the differences between the two producing an interesting contrast. The recording I made conventionally is interesting primarily as a contrasting document of how the beach sounded as I recorded it.

I intend to release this “art work” with a minimum of tinkering; I think it will be enough to present the two tracks as they are, contextualized by photos I took of the awesome array of flotsam washed up on an otherwise paradisiacal stretch of beach.

Despite its simple, even austere, component materials, I do not consider *Flotsam* a simple work. That it is so superficially simple is, in fact, a clue that the listener should consider it more closely. Though it sounds self-congratulatory to say, for me this piece was the equivalent of brush calligraphy: a deceptively minimal outcome made possible by years of rehearsal.

Formally, I believe *Flotsam* balances three aspects I habitually (in my outdated way) judge art on: its beauty

and craft, its subject and concept, and its significance within its (discursive) context.

So far, in discussing my definitions of music and sound art as they apply to working with field recordings, I've concentrated on the first two of those aspects. What makes this piece successful for me as art is not that it works on both of those levels but that it foregrounds the set of relationships between them—I might even say that the art in this piece simply is those relationships. What I like in particular is the way those relationships turn out to be something other than what they might initially be assumed to be when they are explicitly considered.

*Flotsam* is based on a premise: that the listener, when confronted with the unfortunate circumstances of its component recordings' making, will reconsider both their beauty as phonographs (which you will have to take at my word), and the significance of the (arguably) conceptually interesting strategy applied to make them. It is the almost alchemical operation of the piece's context on its more material aspects that makes me think of it as a successful work of art.

To wit: in light of *Flotsam*'s context, I hope that the beauty of the recordings that constitute it will not so much be repealed as called into (moral?) question—made akin, if you will, to oil-slick rainbows on a puddle: lovely, but troubling in their implications.

I hope that the concept of making a recording inside a bottle becomes more interesting; in particular I hope the fact that each of the bottles in question is sea trash evokes (and deforms) the latent conceit of a message in a bottle such that unexpectedly a message is exactly what the recordings in the piece turn out to be—that they are understood to document not only the surf but also, additionally, the sound of a beach that has been littered.

I hope the inclusion of the conventional binaural recording will be understood to offer not just a baseline from which to compare the way bottles filter sound, but also a reminder of how the beach would (could) sound from any arbitrary place on it—if only some of those places, the other one documented, for example, had not been littered.

I gave my definition for sound art as sound about something—but most particularly, about its own qualities, its

own nature. Ultimately this piece is not about sound. It is not the recordings I made, taken on their own merit, that are at its core. What is most important in the work is not what the piece's sound itself is about, as either music or sound art.

Instead, I believe the artistic moment in *Flotsam* occurs in the dynamics at play between the piece's sound and their context, in particular in what I described far above as a type of dissonance. The piece is about (sonically documents) an object (a bottle) and a place (a beach); but an additional artistry occurs in the moment that those things are (to use a strong word) perverted by their context (the fact of them being beach trash).

To complete my crude system of classification, then, I would say that art in an unqualified sense occurs in this piece because its referential horizon extends beyond what is present in the piece itself (even more so because that extension is in this case concisely reflexive). *Flotsam* is about something beyond itself; it cannot be (fully) understood as long as it is analyzed only in terms of its immediate (e.g. sonic) characteristics. For me, this makes it a work of art that transcends, even as it is constructed from, sound. This is not a value claim but an observation.

With its subject matter thrown open beyond the confines of its own medium, work naturally takes on a different character. Confronting subjects beyond its own operation it may become more humble: it less often states or demonstrates than contemplates; it questions more often than it posits; it proposes more often than it claims. It may more often surprise. It may speak to a broader audience. This is my experience, both as a maker and as the audience for this kind of sound art.

(I find it provocative that the work I think of as the most artistically sophisticated is also the simplest in form and was the simplest to execute; that said, I do think it exhibits beauty as an exercise in its medium.)

### **Making Art?**

To say that some sound art transcends its medium is not a value judgment. But I feel compelled to make a related one, about the relationship between the sound art and larger art worlds. Namely, that to the extent that sound art itself remains focused on (obsessed with) the properties of its own constituent medium, it remains "qualified" art. It limits itself to being behind the times, philosophically, and to what I would call a genre-ghetto,

practically. This is an observation I have made, not a principal of mine.

I defined sound art as I did partly because of how I have internalized the way that it is (often if subtly) set apart from what I would call art-world-art; my experience is that outside of the sound art community, which perceives no pejorative, work labeled “sound art” is often (if not always) in a sense also being labeled not-art. The implication is that if it were up to snuff, it would be simply art (with a capital “A”) that happens to make use of sound.

(This seems to be a contemporary risk run by all mediums that take themselves too seriously as mediums—I am thinking of painting, photography, almost everything I regularly encounter in museums and galleries oddly enough—and not uncommonly, by other art forms preceded by a qualifier such as “performance” and “land.” That said, there are uses that merely describe rather than diminish; and everything must be categorized of course...)

A historical reason for the genrefication of sound art I have alluded to already is that much of it is not only

produced but performed, distributed, evaluated, and written about as if it were music. Considered from the art world, music qua music is undeniably one of the “Others.” It is no surprise that sound works thus seem to sometimes overeagerly embrace alternate modes of presentation (sculpture and installation, particularly) to avoid being characterized as music, even when such presentation seems peripheral to the work’s essence. (I include here my own *Serendipity Machines*, which in the interests of being “show-able,” reify a concept that could probably be demonstrated in less sculptural ways.)

But more significant, I think, is that to the admittedly limited extent that I understand it, art-world art seems these days to most often locate the artistic experience intentionally outside of—often in spite of, or even in a hostile or provocative relation to—its medium, regardless of what that medium is. I encounter work that fetishizes craft in an ironic or suspect way, or celebrates a disregard for it, at least as often as I encounter the simple application of (indulgence in?) skill.

What I as an outsider see taken most seriously in the art world is work that relies on the cultural context of its creation—on deeply mutually-aware artists and

audiences (including critics and theorists)—for not only its interpretation but for its subject matter, even its materials. Work that is defined, in fact, by the relationship it strikes with that very dialog: the inflection it has towards its own cultural-historical context may be the essence of its style—often, is its essence, full stop.

When I am unaware of the specifics or even the nature of that dialog—as I often am—work like this can be unintelligible; when it is unintelligible it is not infrequently also unenjoyable. (I do not expect art to be enjoyable, but simple pleasures are all that is left when the complex ones—occasionally intentionally—elude and exclude me.) It can feel alternately arbitrary and over-determined, it can feel overly coy; I worry that when it is not obviously those things, it may be again, by being self-conscious in its refutation of them. When it lacks irony, I suspect that lack is itself ironic.

Attempting to locate the artistic moment in this kind of work, it seems that the message itself is the new medium—and that the medium is but a necessity.

Though there is sound work in that world, the majority of sound work I encounter does not intentionally

operate in this fashion. That is not the way most sound artists think.

This is not the artistic milieu I would have chosen.

I still make (musical) sound art because I am at heart what I like to call a “curmudgeon for lovely,” where “lovely” is just a flip way of summarizing the things we traditionally have looked to art to provide: the sublime, beauty, pathos, etc. I am still fascinated by the ways sound operates and by the ways I can sometimes provoke such things with it. In this I have what I think is a modernist (or even classical) set of concerns, quaintly antiquated in rarified circles, if ever ubiquitous in my broader culture. I am interested in intellectual sophistication and subtlety, but I do not have current tastes in how that sophistication is to be deployed.

A younger me would demand that I make my own milieu, go where my own instincts lead. Is not the cliché of (possibly pathological) artistic integrity to commit to one’s own vision, in dialog with other artists working in conceptually related territory only inasmuch as their work demands refutation or invites comment? Should interpretation and analysis not



be left to (probably posthumous) critics, collectors, and listeners?

But the me of today is aware that that if I indulge only my own instincts, I foreclose on dialog and its benefits: the possibility, if not the promise, of [re]education, growth, inspiration, even modest enlightenment. Pragmatically, I would also circumscribe the terrain in which my work might be noticed, let alone taken seriously.

And just as much as I am interested in the “lovely,” I am interested in participating in my culture intellectually and socially. I am drawn to concentrations of cultural capital; I would like to be privy to and to take part in the conversations in that capital’s capitals. (Alas, I am not unaware that this desire itself is romantic in a way that is embarrassing and probably out of vogue.)

Unless I want to wait for privileged “outsider” status, or to flourish only in subcultural circles, I must be conversant in—if not natively a speaker of—the cultural lingua franca of my day. To do so, in other words, I must make work that speaks that language.

A friend told me the value she most took from her MFA program was that she understood better what conversations were going on around her, and hence what her art was saying to other people.

I am old enough to know that I need to pay attention to what I am saying.

### **What am I Becoming?**

I wrote above that I thought there were consequences for not knowing what I was becoming.

Labels matter when we talk about what we do with others, as I am doing now. The vocabulary I use to describe myself—musician, sound artist, or artist—implies the context in which my work was made and signals how I intend it to be interpreted.

Labels influence who might make time to listen to or think about the work I do. Over my life the language I define myself with will shape how I conceive of my work and how others receive it. It will determine what I become and what I will have offered. The labels I choose will define the work that I do.

Labels also matter because by accepting or rejecting them, I may help frame understanding of and debate around my work. The vocabulary that clusters around a given label establishes the terms under which the work I produce is marketed, sold, and—dare I say it—consumed. The wrong label could doom my work to trivialization and probable misinterpretation. Dare I say it, it could doom it to critical and commercial failure.

So which role? Which label? I remain conflicted.

There is no shame in working as a musician, or a sound artist, as opposed to an artist (capital “A”), but I don’t need to remind you how our culture assigns different value to each of these “modes of cultural production.”

I believe the young me is right that I should trust to instincts—but this old me has instincts that clash, conflicting imperatives in the hierarchy of my needs. My cerebellum wants to make art that strikes a grace note to the cultural Zeitgeist, but my ass just wants to make music that rocks.

I will probably continue to work in all the ways I have defined; for one thing, I conceptualize each aspect as

encapsulating the one before it, not replacing it. None is independent of, or in true hierarchical relationship to, the others; each merely moves further from the properties inherent in the work itself and into the context in which those properties are presented and interpreted.

And regardless of the label I espouse, I hope, of course, that my work partakes of (and balances) all my concerns, if in different measure at different times. I am more than at peace with this fate, I embrace it; I have always thought art should reward on many levels. (This is true of the work I discussed here: for example, there are aspects of *Guantánamo Express* I would describe as “artistic,” such as the fact that it was chosen as a subject for a major piece specifically because of the single-note association “Guantánamo” has for Americans—my intent was to provoke a self-awareness of the unfortunate way that the reality of Guantánamo as a place, with its own culture, has been almost completely obscured.)

In any event, the choice may ultimately not be mine. I am and will continue to be labeled by other people.

### Where am I Going?

As I try to come to terms with (and come up with the terms for) what I am doing, I will keep wandering. I will keep working.

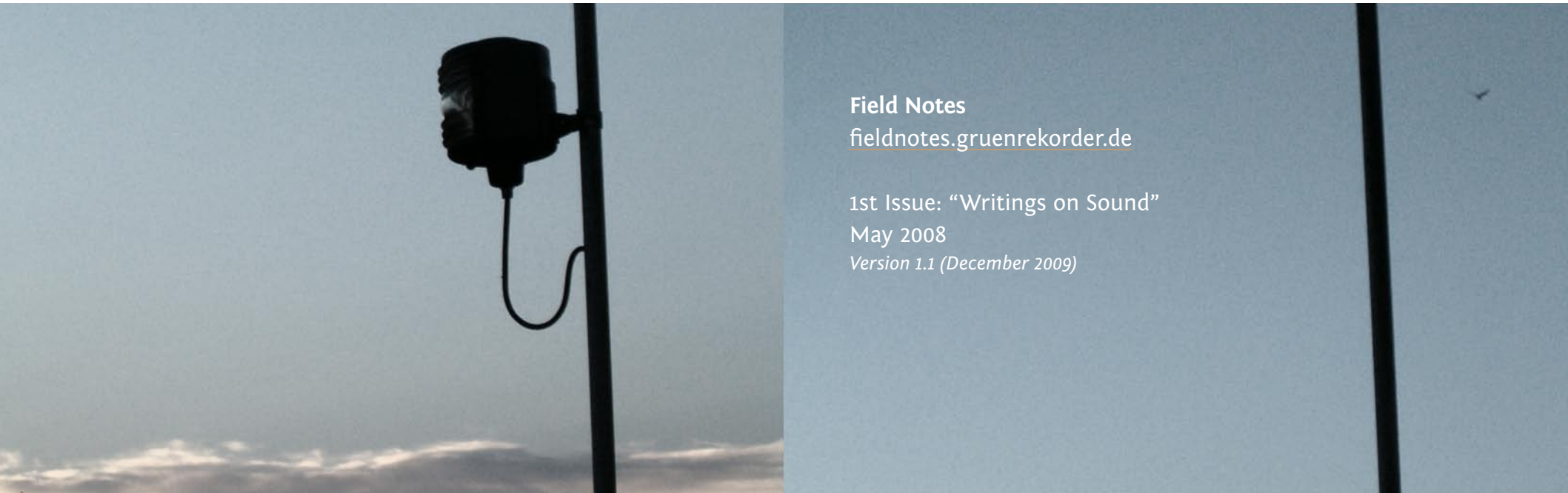
I work with documentary sound, so at least I am keeping a record: there are tacks on my mental map that mark what I've thought specific work to be, question marks that indicate where I thought of settling into a specific role, empty pin-pricks that show where I reconsidered old projects. I've made an erratic mess; I can imagine the frowning mentor I never had clucking, calipers in hand, as it becomes clear that with my scattershot efforts I have not settled within an acceptable radius. That I have no style and that I don't know what I am: that I am lost.

I can live with lost. I will endeavor to embrace it; I appreciate the symmetry between the fact that I spend my time documenting with sound the situation of being lost—and the fact that now as an artist working with that sound, I am lost again in a whole new way.

I just need to remember to stay honest about how lost I am.



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