four questions # : Anja Kanngieser

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JrF: when & why did you become interested in field recording?

AK: I have always had a keen sensitivity to sound. I grew up on a boat, then at the age of six moved onto a small island with no cars, shops or streetlights; from a young age I lived in predominantly marine and bush environments. I first moved to a city when I was eighteen, at which point I realised how different my experiences were from the people around me. Moving between such diverse environments made me very conscious of my psycho-somatic responses to sound. At first I was disturbed by what I, at that time, understood as entirely mechanical, manmade sounds. This is where my initial encounters with field recordings began, as a noise floor to drown out the urban sounds around me, which I felt overwhelmed by. Over time, I gradually became acclimatised to the urban environment, though I still get a certain relief from field recordings.

It took me several years to identify and then unravel my internal discriminations and oppositions (city as noisy/ rural or marine as quiet, city as disturbance/ rural or marine as soothing, city as bad/ rural or marine as good) and I began to understand responses to sound as always deeply physically, emotionally, socially and morally grounded. I also became fascinated by the process of recording and the kinds of fantasies that field recordings generate, of how "nature" and the world should be, which helped me to demystify the oppositions I had long held on to. In letting go of these I was able to better hear the complex, changing amalgamations of sounds making up the everyday spaces I was in. This led me to really interrogate the foundations of field recordings, how they are produced, by whom and to what ends.

JrF: how do you use your field recordings in your own artistic output?

AK: Given my perspective on field recordings as generative of worlds, I am very attentive to the power they hold. Field recordings can come to stand in as representations of a place and an event: taking something ephemeral and making it enduring, lifting a situation out of its wider context, and hiding the economies and processes of recording, transduction, editing and commodification that make it accessible to publics. In my own artistic practice I am interested in the narratives that field recordings create, but make sure to set these into hard tension with the contexts from which they arise.

I am a political geographer and work, at present, using sound to explore the theme of anthropogenic (human caused) climate change, and the uneven effects this has on populations (human, animal, plant, geophysical). Climate change is not caused by, nor does it affect, species and populations in the same ways or to the same degrees. Field recordings, especially those produced in Western environments, present a very specific idea of what “nature” is, something that is opposed to the social. I am entirely averse to upholding field recordings as representations of a real “nature”, because how they are framed, and the stories they tell, are always highly classed, raced and gendered; they are always based on histories of capital and colonisation, and this is partially why some sound theorists/ artists, like Holly Ingleton, are suspicious of them. Because of this, I only use field recordings in combination with other methods such as oral histories and sonifications when I am trying to communicate earth system changes. I feel it of utmost importance to make sure my use of sound is committed to rigorous political critique. My field recordings are never pristine (not that I think such a state is actually possible) and I make sure not to invisibilise myself, and the factors involved, in the process; this is something that Salome Voegelin, for instance, has extensively spoken about. For a very long time I used self-built microphones and cheap recorders which couldn’t help but betray my, and their, own presence; this becomes hidden with more expensive equipment that has less audible cracks and hisses. Remaining in the recording is, for me, critical to suspending belief of the "natural" worlds that field recordings represent.

Coming from a social science background, I am really interested in how scientists and physical geographers use sound in their work as a means for measurement and communication. Most recently I have turned to the use of recordings in the field of bioacoustics, to map out species extinction and patterns of environmental inhabitation. I am keen to further explore what it means to understand field recording as a hermeneutic and pedagogical device for tracing out long scale changes.

JrF: do you regard 'natural' sounds as a musical element (bearing in mind that the conventional definition of 'music' is rapidly becoming obsolete) or as sound ? is this definition important to you ? does it matter ? (nb. the term 'natural' is used in this instance to describe any sound from any object, animal or human that is observed rather than generated with apparent compositional intent)

AK: Honestly I don't really think about sound and music as all that distinct, but that is based on the very individual experience of how I listen to sound day to day, and I could certainly argue the opposite as well. I have an eclectic ear, and my tastes can be mercurial and contradictory: while I can be irritated beyond belief by airplanes and low frequency truck rumbles, I can happily listen to industrial, breakbeat and 'noise' music. At the same time, though, whenever I am feeling aurally vulnerable I tend to fetishise the most nostalgic, well-produced ocean and forest recordings. Over the past years I have realised that a part of me is strongly attracted to music that resonates with, or incorporates, some kinds of field recordings (often heavily processed, but field recordings nonetheless).

I recently went through a phase while I was living in London where I didn't want to listen to recorded music/ sound because I felt so fatigued by the constant rhythms of the areas I was in and moved through. I started out wearing headphones all the time with looped field recordings, but eventually I stopped the recordings and just had headphones on to block out the world around me. It took moving to a smaller city for me to want to listen to music again. Once when I was really struggling with car alarms, a friend told me to think of them as a beat and to dance to them. As true as it was, I couldn't take on the advice because I was so annoyed by this intrusion that I had no control over and could find no respite from. It really pushed me to acknowledge the role that individuated control plays over the distinction of noise from sound and music, an argument that I had intellectually made many times, but had not really personally connected with, again because of my own internal discriminations.

JrF: how has the act of field recording altered the way you listen to your everyday surroundings and how has it affected the way you listen to other music and sound (if at all)?

AK: Listening to field recordings is not the same for me as producing them. When I listen to recordings I use them as a tool for amending my environment, to create a buffer zone or as white noise; I use them to escape my present sound world. The actual recording of field recordings is very different in that I use microphones to delve more deeply into the environment in which I am situated. I remember first getting some very nuanced microphones and eavesdropping on the people in the street outside my house, they were so acute that I felt like I had bionic ears. When I am attached to microphones I feel like I inhabit a register of the everyday that is more intense, that is fiercer than my usual state. Sometimes I love it, and sometimes it nauseates me, everything becomes too crisp and too highly defined.

Turning on the recording device is really optional a lot of the time. For me, field recording is pleasurable in the aspect of listening, in the clarity of sound, in maintaining the pretence of super hearing. Listening is a practice in itself, with no purpose but itself, with no other audience or output. While field recording comprises a part of my practice, listening comprises a far larger part. I also prefer listening to things that apprehend my body beyond my ears, frequencies that vibrate on my skin, inside my organs. This vibration is often missed in the recording element.

Over the last five years, I have done work on sound warfare, surveillance and sonic terror, as well as begun to look at sounds of extinction, which can take place on levels that are extra audible or sub-audible for humans. A collaborator, Michael Gallagher, recently questioned the ethics of listening to, and taking aesthetic pleasure from, sounds of violence and catastrophe. This is a crucial question to pose to field recording and to the acts of listening to recordings. Field recordings can modify or hide the political in the everyday in favour of the aesthetic. They can erase the very asymmetrical embodied and affective traumas that come with them, or recast them as sublime. Recordists and listeners would do well to be attentive to these tendencies in acts of field recording, and experiment with ways to bring these issues into dialogue with their practice.