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ON SOUNDSCAPES, PHONOGRAPHY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL SOUND ART

Marinos Koutsomichalis

Abstract

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This paper proposes a pragmatic response to the broad philosophical question of what constitutes a soundscape and in what ways it might resonate through consciousness and perception. It also discusses phonography, criticizes its incapability to capture the essence of environmental sound, and explains how a series of artistic practices emerged and established themselves within the non-linearities of the recording-reproduction paradigm. Further, it elaborates on how sound art inaugurates new ways of perceiving, thinking about and representing soundscapes, accordingly. In this respect, several examples are discussed, including a selection of works by the author.

Resonating Space and Time

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Soundscapes manifest themselves in terms of numerous heterogeneous sonic events that occur in both the spatial and the temporal domains. These sonic events interrelate organically, forming an ever-changing complex texture inhabiting all four dimensions. If we understand audio space as neither linear nor homogenous (McLuhan 2004), then we can consider all soundscapes to be typical Deleuzean rhizomes. A rhizome is a singular entity of arbitrary complexity structured in a non-causal and haphazard way; according to Deleuze it is typical for rhizomes to deterritorialize (that is, to destabilize and move into new territories) and reterritorialize (that is, to recreate order) (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Sutton & Martin-Jones 2008: 3–8). Soundscapes behave likewise, as they typically consist of several equilibrium phases, demonstrating canonicity of some sort, as well as in-between periods of instability and change. In their temporal being, soundscapes exhibit arbitrary permutation and may manifest themselves in different ways, which in turn broadens or narrows their spatial footprint accordingly; they are largely ever-permuting and amorphous, and, even if they occasionally appear to be governed by certain repetitive patterns, the specifics of every reoccurrence are always unique.

Temporality and permutability are, therefore, essential properties of the sonic identity of a place, and, consequently, fundamental to the very notion of soundscape. Acoustic encounters with a location are relative to the listener's positioning in space and time and are merely fragments of a broader scheme. That is to say, individuals are intrinsic nodes of a broader generative rhizome, rather than autonomous elements. Soundscapes are, thus, inaccessible to direct experience in their true polymorphism. Nonetheless, they can be structurally and conceptually denoted as meaningful *gestalts* which signify the sound characteristics of a particular location: even if the soundscape of Athens, for example, were alien to me, still, it would be quite straightforward to understand what 'soundscape of Athens' stands for.

Consciousness and Hermeneutics

Identifying and deciphering a soundscape is not a process merely dependent on subjective spatiotemporal positioning; it, additionally, has cultural, intellectual, and psychophysical aspects. There is, unquestionably, more to one's acoustic perception of a location than just one's sensory-motoric encounters with it. What we sense cannot be defined solely in terms of some external stimulus, because we do attribute meanings to whatever we sense (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 9). A wolf's howl or a baby's cry, for example, are always more than just their physical sound matter; not only are they automatically attributed some significance, but, also, this significance could be dramatically different for each individual. Renowned soundscape researcher and composer Barry Truax suggests that both the conscious and the subconscious mind are involved in identifying and understanding a soundscape (Truax 1999).

On a cognitive level, we always filter sounds through our own socio-cultural background. A sound is perceived in respect to the context within which it is presented and is subjectively associated with semantic and cognitive patterns. Listening to a French song in Tokyo could be strikingly different from listening to the same song in Paris, as the thought patterns they trigger will probably vary, just as the underlying message they convey may vary, too. Evidently, groups of people may share similar cultural backgrounds and, thus, may have a similar understanding of a soundscape; notwithstanding, connotations are further forged with respect to individual idiosyncrasy and emotional state, unique mental representations, imagination, and personal memories. According to Voegelin, the soundscape and the listener are constantly in an intersubjective, reciprocally inventive production; every individual's encounter with a soundscape remains unique and "phantasmagoric", while sociality is implied through "playful agonistic" differences amongst individuals (Voegelin 2010: 3-6 and 121-166).

But even what we experience at a pre-cognitive level is not pure sound at all; that no object exists on its own without some kind of consciousness involved is a fundamental principle for all phenomenologists. Heidegger claimed that no such thing as pure sound exists; rather than sound itself, we only hear how certain things sound (Heidegger 1971: 15–87). According to Merleau-Ponty, sensation is never pure sensation, as meanings and messages are even primordially attributed to our surroundings (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 3–15). We are ourselves primarily responsible for what we perceive, and our understanding of a soundscape traces back to our individual perceptual apparatus. Note, also, that certain sounds and noisy soundscapes may even trigger distinctive emotional states or certain pathologies in some individuals (such as migraines, epilepsies, etc., as discussed in, e.g., Wöber and Wöber-Bingöl 2010; Neumann and Waters 2006; Wolf and Koepp 2012), thus unconditionally juxtaposing a soundscape with certain psycho-emotional states.

Subliminal Perception

Our hearing apparatus is inherently non-linear, with respect to both physiology (Yost 2007) and perceptional mechanisms. Soundscapes are shown to typically consist of sound-matter scattered in space and time in an arbitrary way. However, a human subject will segregate them into various sonic streams, semantically attribute each one of them and then favor some and ignore others, thus imposing a hierarchy on what s/he perceives (Cusack and Carlyon 2004; Bregman 1994). Auditory scene analysis is that branch of psychophysics that examines the way the human mind organizes sound into perceptually meaningful elements. It provides a detailed overview concerning the physical and cognitive factors that appear to be responsible for selectively grouping sound components together or segregating complex sounds into distinct sonic objects (Bregman 1994). However, it says very little about the mechanisms of our perception that perform this grouping or dividing, a task addressed by the phenomenology of perception, according to which attention is not rationally attracted by some certain quality in general; on the contrary, "at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 31).

Complex sounds can be conceived either holistically or analytically - as coherent sonic streams or as consisting of several distinct ones - with respect to the context; it is very rare, however, that a soundscape is holistically experienced - in most cases it is perceived as a set of foreground sounds that oppose background ones (Bregman 1994; Neuhoff 2004). Attended sounds constitute the foreground, and irrelevant, unattended ones the background. Background sounds remain, indeed, audible but are latent until our perception casts them as

foreground ones (Bregman 1994; Posner and Petersen 1990; Fritz, Elhilali, David and Shamma 2007; Elhilali, Xiang, Shamma, and Simon 2008). The ear demonstrates the capacity to selectively focus on specific sounds and to switch the attention from one sound to another (Westerkamp 2002); however, the pattern recognition issue of foreground-background decomposition is addressed by our auditory system in a rather complex way and is also affected by other perceptual modalities (Neufoff 2004). The sound segregation process at a pre-attentive level is concomitant with the attention-dependent perceptual mechanisms. While both contribute to the formation of auditory objects and streams, they regularly short-circuit each other, leaving perception in temporary confusion that may last even several seconds and which could be yet further aggravated by some attentional shift (Fritz et al. 2007). Our perceptual system may even fill in occluded information, under certain circumstances (Fritz et al. 2007), backing up phenomenologists' claims that sensation is never pure.

An Aural Cosmos

Consequently, soundscapes are not to be considered as just the aggregate of sounds that occur in a certain place, since a set of rather complex perceptual and psychophysical mechanisms are predominantly involved in their signification. Neither should they be confined to their phenomenology alone, as they are shown to be intrinsically infinite, ever-permuting and unequivocally inaccessible to direct experience; yet, they can be conceptualized as meaningful entities. Soundscapes are broad rhizomatic gestalts, responsible for unique individual-specific encounters with respect to the multiple dimensions of human consciousness, of psychophysical being, and of a relative positioning in physical time-space. In its proper being-in-itself, i.e. its fully accomplished being (Heidegger 1962), a soundscape would be the all-inclusive projection of all of its possible phenomenological perspectives; a boundless meta-rhizome that deterritorializes and reterritorializes through all of its contingencies to become the perspective-less position from which all else derives.

During the last decades we have witnessed an ever-growing interest towards soundscapes. R. Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* (Schafer 1977) inaugurated acoustic ecology as a new multi-disciplinary area of research and, along with his associates, systemized the study of soundscapes during the '70s. Since the '90s, the interest in environmental sound has become even more prominent, partly due to the foundation of the World Forum For Acoustic Ecology (WFAE) and its several affiliated organizations, and partly due to an ever-growing number of independent artists who, one way or another, introduced environmental sound into their practices. Gradually, the idea of capturing environmental sounds into some fixed medium, in order to reproduce them elsewhere and at a later time, has found its way into the agendas of biologists, artists, ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, composers, ecologists, and other specialists who started rigorously recording the soundscapes of the world.

Having said that, I think that the term soundscape is rather ill-defined and far from having a useful signification, most likely due to the plethora of disciplines related to so-called soundscape studies and their corresponding offshoots. To a certain extent, any technical or theoretical engagement with environmental sound is specific to one's understanding of what a soundscape is and how it manifests itself. Under these premises, I believe that a proper ontological analysis of soundscapes is fundamental to both practicing and theorizing phonography, acoustic ecology, or sound art. It should be emphasized that the subsequent discourse on phonography and sound art both ensues, and is indispensable to, my former analysis.

Obtrusive Semiotics

From this paper's perspective, what a soundscape conveys cannot find its way into some electroacoustic representation of it, and even if, hypothetically, there were no technical constraints, the recording medium would fail to preserve the original semantics and subliminal significances of someone's encounter with an acoustic environment; audio recording technology is not meant to carry out such a task in the first place. According to Krause, audio reproduction could result in dramatically different perceptions of a soundscape compared to the actual listening experience, in the original location and time (Krause 2002: 110). Recording a soundscape is, effectively, to isolate physical sounds from a broader scheme, in terms of radically dismantling the associations they bear with particular intellectual, perceptual, socio-cultural, and psychophysical modal qualities. They also

engender arbitrary significations and unyielding messages at the time of reproduction; no medium is transparent, as further elaborated in (McLuhan 1964).

A recording is always something more – and, at the same time, less – than the sound it captures; less in the sense that a recording is, in essence, a de-reference of the original sound the microphone picked up (Schafer 1977; Schaeffer 1966; Norman 1996); more in the sense that it substantially distorts the ontological status of sound. Environmental sound is ephemeral and abstract, while a recording is fixed, immutable and everlasting; the more it gets listened to, the more it signifies back to itself, and eventually a-recording-of-something becomes this-particular-recording-of-something, as also implied in (Demers 2010), (Eno 2008), and (Adorno 1990). Recording is essentially an act of decontextualizing sound (Norman 1996) and audio reproduction an act of recontextualizing it according to a new set of conditions. On that account, *schizophonia* (Schafer 1977: 90–91) and dislocation are inherent to all phonographic practices (LaBelle 2006: 195–201). In the case of environmental sound, these phenomena can be quite dramatic, insofar as the circumstances under which the electroacoustic reproduction of sound occurs might bear absolutely no relation to the original context, further accentuating such a dislocation, e.g. in the case of sounds from a tropical rainforest being reproduced in a Western city's art gallery. Not only are these sounds perceived in a totally different way than how they might be in their original environment, but, more to the point, the very fact that someone opted to promulgate those sorts of sounds in a space originally meant to accommodate art biases the listening experience in a definite way, as further discussed in the next section.

In short, straightforward phonography fails as a medium to preserve, to document, or to represent environmental sound in its essence. Most practitioners and theorists seem to second this view (e.g. Norman 2004: 55-75; Krause 1998). In the terms of this paper, the relationship of a soundscape to a recording of it is inherently superficial. Henceforth, I will discuss the role of sound art, how it emerges out of the non-linearities of the recording medium and how it inaugurates alternative ways to think of, interpret, evaluate, and represent soundscapes. I will use the term environmental sound art to refer to both music and sound art that are systemically, contextually, or otherwise concerned with environmental sound, since there appears to be an ongoing debate about what, exactly, the differences are between the two terms (Demers 2010: 124-131).

Vociferous Artifacts

Environmental recordings have appeared within artistic contexts since the days of early electronic music, yet it was only recently that field recording practices became more pre-eminent and to some extent standardized. As already mentioned, the reframing of environmental sound according to some artistic context dramatically biases its significance in a number of ways. This is often evident when it is the artist's intention, but even if an artist attempts to merely present or distribute recordings of a soundscape in the most straightforward way, having no compositional or other endeavors in his/her agenda, and even if it were possible to accurately reproduce environmental sound in all of its aspects, the very act of doing so would contribute content in its own right: namely, that the artist considered a particular location worthwhile to record, listen to, and distribute. Moreover, distributing soundscape recordings through a network originally meant to distribute music or art implicitly suggests that a particular sound environment is to be considered as music or as art, of some sort, or at least that the artist is attempting to contrast it with music or art for some reason.

It is exactly due to these ramifications that phonography can potentially be regarded as art. As shown by Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* (Masheck 2002) and the emerging ready-made movement in its various forms, recontextualizing a physical object results in it being ascribed a totally different meaning. Aesthetic merit lies exactly in such a recontextualization and in the eventual reconstitution of the original object, rather than in what it originally connoted (Masheck 2002; Hopkins 2005). What makes *Fountain* a work of art is not so much Duchamp's intention to present it as such, but the very fact that it made its way into the art-world system (Coulter-Smith 2009); that is to say, *Fountain* is cast extrinsically, according to the reverberations of the medium that brought it in front of an audience. By the same token, when environmental sound makes its way into the art-world, it is immediately constituted as art and forged semantically according to the specifics of its recontextualization. The audience does not encounter just environmental audio, but, instead, environmental audio which is explicitly framed as valid art, a fact which is a rather important signification in its own right.

According to McLuhan, the content depends largely on the medium (McLuhan 1964). For example, consider the rhetorics of authorship, of technical skill, of novelty, or of aesthetic merit, which are normally irrelevant to

experiencing environmental sound in its origin, but are, indeed, common artistic discourses. That being so, personal ideologies, views and opinions concerning art will eventually bias the phenomenological significance of an environmental audio recording accordingly. Then, the institutionalization of the various environmental sound art practices raises structural and symbolical interdependencies, so that artworks are systemically associated with their predecessors and with respective art movements, and are, therefore, automatically positioned within a broader narrative; see, for example, (Goodman 1976) for how music appears to depend upon intrinsic symbolical references and associations.

Reclaiming the Soundscape

The unavoidable recontextualization during reproduction not only points toward the problematics of a representational approach as well as the non-linearities of the various phonographic practices, but, more importantly, it designates new ways to address artistic concerns. That is to say, there can be artistic merit in attempting to represent a soundscape, precisely because it is impossible to do so. Environmental sound arts establish themselves according to the various ways in which practitioners dislocate and recontextualize environmental sound according to their individual aesthetic aspirations. A systemized taxonomy of such practices is well beyond the scope of this paper; nonetheless, I will selectively discuss a few examples in order to demonstrate how the aforementioned challenges are pragmatically addressed.

Firstly, I will discuss the case of Spanish artist and sound recordist Francisco López, precisely because he is not interested in representation at all. Yet, as I will further elaborate upon, I believe that his approach is founded exactly upon the presence of elements that can be understood as representational - at least as far as albums such as *La Selva* (López 1998), *Buildings* (López 2001) or *Wind* (López 2007) are concerned. The aforementioned works consist entirely of straightforward field recordings of acoustic environments; but even if López publishes concrete recordings of specific environments in a very straightforward way, he soundly declares that these albums are standalone works of art and not merely documentaries. According to López there is no such thing as an objective apprehension of a sonic reality. He pinpoints, rather, the abstract qualities of environmental sound and proposes a "profound" (in his terms) mode of listening so that sound remains vague and open to a non-causal, less inclusive listening, and "freed of procedural, contextual or intentional levels of reference", thus conjuring a phenomenological reduction (López 2004; Demers 2010: 113-134). To precondition some set listening attitude from the audience is, ostensibly, influenced by Schaeffer's theoretical writings, but, more importantly, it is also grounded in López's understanding of what phonography is and what it can and cannot do (López 2004; Schaeffer 1966).

Francisco López - La Selva (excerpt)

In the case of *La Selva* (López 1998) (recorded in the homonymous neotropical reserve in Costa Rica), López argues that he was not interested in a representation of the original environment but rather in the creation of music based on the inner qualities of the sounds he is using. It is worth mentioning that the original liner notes of the *La Selva* CD (López 1998) included an extended text wherein López discusses his ontological understanding of environmental sound and of phonography as well as his "profound" listening approach (López 2004). In turn, *La Selva* was distributed through a network originally meant to distribute music; that being so - as in the case of Magritte's infamous *This is not a pipe* (Foucault 1983) - López explicitly directs his audience's attention to the non-representational facets of what could be otherwise conceived as a straightforward reproduction of a soundscape, thus suggesting an alternative way to experience and evaluate environmental audio. I would argue that even if López asks the listener to focus on the inner, abstract qualities of his work, this can only occur with respect to those elements that can be thought of as representational ones. *La Selva* does not pretend that it cannot be thought of as a representation (López himself does acknowledge that elements of *La Selva* could be understood and even used as representational, indeed [López 2004]); it merely suggests that there are certain qualities within it that are inaccessible to us if we understand it as just a presentation of a soundscape. Using

López's own words: "The richness of this sound matter in nature is astonishing, but to appreciate it in depth we have to face the challenge of profound listening" (López 2004). In my opinion, it is exactly due to the very concrete, highly referential quality of environmental audio that profound listening arises and justifies itself. Hence, even if soundscape reproduction is not the goal here, it is implied throughout as a valid condition that must be transcended for *La Selva* to fully achieve its musical potential - at least according to López intentions.

Renowned recordist Chris Watson follows a very different strategy in several of his podcasts: e.g. A Journey South (Watson 2010) and Alcendo Volcano (Watson 2006), recorded in Antarctica and at a volcano in the Galapagos, respectively. In these two podcasts, Watson dynamically engages, in terms of recording, with a place while he interchanges microphones and his own positioning and while he verbally describes the location, his actions, as well as various technical and other issues. Instead of leaving environmental sound vague and open to individual interpretation, he deliberately encapsulates it within a broader narrative and, concurrently, he communicates the specifics of his encounters along with his individual understanding of what made the original soundscape special and worth recording in the first place. Watson manages to immerse his listeners in an almost interactive storytelling and, in a sense, to recreate his particular encounters with these two locations in the minds of his audience. He deliberately directs the listeners' attention back toward certain elements of the soundscapes he explores, successfully accentuating and efficiently communicating what he considers to be their essential features. I would argue that Watson's podcasts do achieve a more substantial acoustic presentation than what straightforward recording would allow, in that they are less vague and, at the same time, more informative of both the original soundscape and of Watson's particular understanding of it. In this respect, Watson achieves an acoustic no man's land, wherein representation is, to some extent, both possible and meaningful.

I explained above how recording is, effectively, an act of decontextualization that isolates physical sounds from their intellectual, perceptual, socio-cultural, and psychophysical tokens. While Watson artificially recreates such associations in order to achieve a meaningful representation of an environment, López relies on schizophonia to focus on the inner qualities of environmental sonic matter. Both Watson and López are well aware of the limitations of the recording technology and the problematics of representation. For all that, they exploit them accordingly to arrive at two diametrically opposed goals: essential representation and non-causal listening. My next example, Jana Winderen's *Energy Field* (Winderen 2010), paradoxically achieves both. In *Energy Field*, where Winderen juxtaposes recordings from the Barents Sea, Greenland and Norway, one can actually listen to a hyperrealistic conglomeration of several individual perspectives of a soundscape (even if the soundscape may be quite broad, geographically speaking). Winderen is very straightforward in accurately describing a sonic environment in terms of the characteristic sounds of local fauna and miscellaneous geophysical phenomena; however, her approach is by no means a documentarian one, and a very characteristic compositional aura is, indeed, evident throughout.

Jana Winderen - excerpt from Energy Field. Taken from the album Energy Field [Touch # TO:73, 2010]. Published by Touch Music [MCPS] www.janawinderen.com

Compared to a straightforward reproduction of soundscape recordings from the area, *Energy Field* proves to be far more descriptive and more indicative of the overall soundscape in its various contingencies. In that sense, it achieves a structural representation of a soundscape as encountered by Winderen in the course of time. It differs from Watson's podcasts, in that *Energy Field* remains open to individual interpretation, allowing for unique, less biased, encounters, since no particular inclination is favored. Winderen's approach also contrasts with López's, in that she does not nurture any particular listening mode or state of mind, neither does she attempt to be explicitly non-representational. It seems inconsequential to her whether the listener will opt for a casual or a non-casual listening approach, since her compositional strategy is consonant with both. *Energy Field* proves both abstract and highly descriptive, both concrete and open-ended. I would call such a work meta-representational, since by neither avoiding nor attempting to be representational, it uncannily manages to achieve both.

Another somewhat common approach these days is that of soundwalking, which, in general, refers to 'any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment' (Westerkamp 2008); see, also, (Drever 2009) for a more detailed background. Personally, I am very skeptical about soundwalking in its various social forms, as whenever I happened to participate, I found it overwhelmingly difficult to focus on the actual listening

experience; being part of a wandering group of individuals proves distracting enough for me to make concentration impossible. Yet, there are some interesting scenarios, for example the DIY-Soundwalk-Instructions (Loveless and Marks 2011), and, similarly, all cases where the audience is encouraged to soundwalk in solitude. DIY-Soundwalk-Instructions is an interactive web project; after clicking a button on the relevant web page, a series of haiku-like instructions are created algorithmically, suggesting the potential listener to soundwalk accordingly. It may be dubious whether such a project qualifies as environmental sound art, yet it is explicitly framed within such an account, citing (Westerkamp 2008) and (Oliveros 2005) in the project's web page, and it does, undeniably, resolve into aesthetically purposeful listening experiences.

DIY-Soundwalk-Instructions is a project with a somehow limited scope, however, the instructions it produces follow a rather Cagean approach, being principally indifferent to the resulting listening manifestation, for example: "Begin your soundwalk where you are now - Open your ears – Walking, and listening, follow the loudest sounds you can locate - Continue until you feel it is time to stop - Wherever you are now: Choose an object and circle it three times - Listen more closely each time". Regardless, the project exemplifies what I consider to be the most interesting aspect of soundwalking practices: the intention to provoke an attentional shift towards a more substantial, more dynamic engagement with soundscapes, wherever they may be encountered and whatever they may be associated with. On its own, such a practice inaugurates an emancipation from the hegemony of both the various phonographic practices, as well as the institutionalized art system in general, zooming in to the specifics of consciousness instead. The role of the artist herein is rather that of a catalyst: instead of attempting to represent the aesthetic, s/he merely encourages the soundwalkers to experience it on their own terms.

Apparently, this preconditions an adequately receptive state of mind, so that a substantial engagement with the soundscape is indeed possible. There is an implicit metaphysical quality in such an approach, in the sense that the aesthetic lies in the practitioner's very state of being, rather than in the audible per se, or in the effects of some recontextualization. Since a successful soundwalk depends largely on the practitioner's state of being, consciousness is both the subject and the medium of such a practice, sharing some common ground with early transcendental phenomenology (Husserl 1990), in that it calls for a shift of awareness towards a fresh, unprejudiced listening of one's surroundings.

An Artist's Approach

In this section, I will briefly discuss three works of mine. It has to be said, that as an artist I am not generally interested in linear representation, but, instead, in exploration. My approach is rather materialistic in the sense that it aims at interrogating the very specifics within which a work occurs, in terms of material, technology, perception and consciousness, as further discussed in (Koutsomichalis 2011b). In most of my works that deal with environmental sound, I principally accelerate these conditions that force the perceptual apparatus to re-evaluate an acoustic topos according to a certain set of directives, as I will elaborate in each case.

In *Passeggio Sonoro* (Koutsomichalis 2011a) - which in Italian means soundwalk - I intuitively juxtapose in situ environmental recordings of various urban, rural and subaquatic environments in order to create an ever-permuting, acoustic environment that challenges perception to engage in multiple ways. *Passeggio Sonoro* is characterized by a very protuberant topology, aided by sophisticated holophonic spatialization techniques and multichannel audio reproduction. The work operates on two levels; it provides the audience with a set of highly detailed surround textures, in order to stimulate a profound, multi-dimensional listening experience at any given moment, while, in terms of the way the soundscape articulates itself over space and time, it prompts miscellaneous perceptual shifts and fuels an interrogation of auditory perception itself.

Passeggio Sonoro (Stereo Mixdown of the original 16-channel studio version)

In the beginning of the work, for instance, the sounds of sea waves gradually become denser and louder, creating a complex noisy texture that appears to mask other sounds, thus triggering sonic delusions and rendering

ambiguity; after several minutes, this, by now quite loud noisy texture, is abruptly muted, to unmask a very subtle rural soundscape that features vocalizations of birds and ducks. This sudden change results in a dramatic attentional shift from the abstract textural characteristics of broadband noise, to a delineation of a rural soundscape. Later on, what is unarguably apprehended as ambient traffic, becomes more and more obscure, to the extent that the trajectories of moving vehicles are perceived, rather, as harmonic partials of an omnipresent drone, which is further aggravated by an additional layer of ambient noise until it attains an immense physicality and results in a quasi-tactile listening experience. Similar phenomena occur regularly throughout the work, causing perceptual modalities to mutate accordingly and engaging listeners with their own cognitive and subliminal reactions. For the purposes of live performances, I, as an intrinsic element of the work, remain constantly presiding over all transfigurations, in order to fine-tune the specifics of every contingency.

In essence, the work attempts to simulate the experience of a soundwalk, but not in strict descriptive terms; it rather pinpoints perceptual phenomena such as masking, casual versus non-casual listening, tactile listening, and others that are likely to occur during an actual soundwalk and under certain circumstances that I attempt to recreate here. Such an approach is deeply rooted in my understanding of a soundscape as being fundamentally linked with auditory perceptual processes and on phonography as a medium incapable of preserving them. Therefore, I have to reconstitute this missing link by means of intuitive juxtaposition, manipulation and re-appropriation of the recordings I use, in order to present the desired listening experience. Even if the result is largely artificial, as it is not based upon some authentic acoustic scenario but rather adheres to compositional tactics, it nevertheless presents and accentuates certain facets of real-life soundscapes.

In *Peripatetic* (Koutsomichalis 2009b) I follow a different route. The work, named after Aristotle's teaching practice, is a fixed medium piece consisting entirely of selected ambulatory recordings of various cityscapes. At that time I was very interested in soundwalking and its corresponding relationship with psycho-geographical practices (see [Debord 1981] concerning psycho-geography); I used to record all my soundwalks in the various cities where I happened to be. Earlier in this article, I discussed how spatiotemporal (re)positioning may result in dramatically different acoustic perceptions of a location. Exploring the compositional aspects of this phenomenon has been the cornerstone of *Peripatetic*, which is based on the idea of freely repositioning myself and my microphones, in order to isolate musically meaningful narratives from the broader cityscape.

Peripatetic (fixed medium audio, stereo)

Peripatetic conveys my understanding of what can be aesthetically interesting in a particular urban soundscape; in that sense it shares some common grounds with Watson's podcasts, as in both cases the attention of the listener is explicitly guided to certain elements that the recordist understands as worthwhile in the original location. In *Peripatetic*, however, the listener encounters only these particular elements and not the broader scheme. The work is quite different to *Passeggio Sonoro* in that the latter is rather territorializing, in all respects, while *Peripatetic* yields a somewhat imperturbable listening experience. The audience is not compelled to adhere to attentional introspections of any kind, neither does it encounter ambivalent sonic equilibria. Listeners are, instead, seduced to simply wander off their normal everyday soundtrack into my personal audio travelogue and challenged to immerse themselves in the subtle musicality of everyday acoustic sketches that steered my attention as I was soundwalking certain cityscapes.

Peripatetic does demonstrate the compositional potential of (re)positioning oneself in space and time to decipher an acoustic environment at will, but more importantly, it also illustrates the complex relationships between environmental sound, phonography, and a concrete artistic idea; i.e. to isolate musically meaningful narratives out of everyday cityscapes. Note that, in this context, "musically meaningful" is a quality of the recorded audio and not necessarily of the original soundscape; that is to say, *Peripatetic* does not attempt to represent such moments, it rather isolates, or in another sense, synthesizes them accordingly by means of ambulatory recording. From the audience's perspective, however, this is neither explicit nor exclusive. *Peripatetic* is an aggregate of audio sketches structured according to my musical understanding, nevertheless it also features elements that can be thought of or encountered as representational or even narrational, thus allowing the listener to unobtrusively engage with the work in a number of possible ways.

The last work I will discuss here is that of the *Soundwalk at Lake Vistonida*. On the occasion of the World

Wetlands Day 2013, I was invited to lead a workshop for children, to conduct recordings in lake Vistonida (situated in North Greece) and to present a live performance based on this material the next day. For this performance as well as for the subsequent studio version, I followed an approach largely influenced by Winderen's *Energy Field*. Having recorded the soundscape from as many different perspectives as possible within the given timeframe, I layered together a selection of these recordings to create an immersive narrative that would be both descriptive of the soundscape in its various contingencies as well as indicative of my exploratory attitude. The work was structured around sounds of birds, of various subaquatic activities, of the wind, of distant passing vehicles, etc.

Soundwalk at Lake Vistonida (fixed medium audio, stereo)

By means of layering and structuring the recorded material accordingly, I attempted to present the soundscape macroscopically as it permutes arbitrarily in space and time, demonstrating, this way, its rhizomatic qualities. Even if it may not always be evident, at any given moment the listener encounters an assortment of several individual acoustic perspectives of the lake. Moreover, I also attempted to decipher and interpret these sounds according to the specifics of my particular encounter with them; I did highlight certain elements, and I did structure the material in a quasi-narrational manner, to further construe, this way, my particular aesthetics and, at the same time, to bias the listener's attention accordingly in order to achieve an explicit acoustic foreground. Therefore, *Soundwalk at Lake Vistonida* both describes how I phenomenologically experienced the original soundscape in its various contingencies over the course of a day and also exemplifies how I conceptualized it macroscopically. In that respect, it provides the listener with more than just decontextualized sounds from a broader framework.

Conclusion

Throughout this text, soundscapes have been conceived as perspective-less meta-rhizomes that constantly manifest themselves through various perceptual, visceral and intellectual modalities, resulting in a rather complex phenomenology, one that is impossible to be captured in any sense. Such a conclusion, however, was shown not to be a polemic against phonographic practices, but, on the contrary, the condition upon which phonography, as a non-linear function, proves to be both a powerful tool and a meaningful medium, as far as environmental sound arts are concerned. It is not by accident that the use of environmental sound in art and music has been standardized over the last decades; it is exactly due to its intrinsic potential to trigger cognition, memory and imagination, as well as miscellaneous perceptual and psycho-emotional phenomena, in unique ways, that environmental sound proves to be potent material. In this respect, I examined several examples to demonstrate how contemporary artists attempt to pragmatically address these concerns.

As far as representation is concerned, works such as the podcasts of Chris Watson and, to some extend, my own *Peripatetic,* were shown to create new ways in which an acoustic environment can be meaningfully and, in a sense, more accurately portrayed. In turn, *Soundwalk at Lake Vistonida* or Winderen's *Energy Field* were illustrated as valid compositional narratives that can be highly descriptive of a soundscape in its various eventualities while also indicative of its rhizomatic qualities. In López's case, representation was shown to be an implicit contingency that must be transcended for the sake of phenomenological reduction. Even consciousness itself, and its corresponding attentional or subliminally-driven perceptual mechanisms, were shown to be valid artistic concerns that ought to be explored for their own sake. This was exemplified by the various soundwalking practices, and also elaborated in the case of *Passeggio Sonoro.*

In my opinion, artistic merit lies not in environmental audio per se, but on the very way artists choose to address the problematics of the recording-reproduction paradigm and, consequently, the conceptual and experiential artifacts of artistic practice. Having discussed all these examples, it should be evident that there is by no means a definitive way to approach environmental sound, neither in its origin, nor as a medium for art. It is my belief that after quite a few decades of relevant artistic practice, practitioners are now seeking more mature and

sophisticated approaches toward understanding and investigating soundscapes, as well as exploring how this knowledge may influence and redefine their individual working methodologies and goals.

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