

P14 / PHONOGRAPHY – REVISITING AURALITY AND CULTURE

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What we hear is how we live
(also a demo of the practice of deep listening¹)

I am typing. The computer hum is right in front of me, pretty loud. On my right, the hum, from a mechanical pump outdoors generates an artificial fountain, squeezing in through the half open window. (Sound is a form of energy in terms of vibration. It appears because of motion. It travels through any medium that allows vibration such as air. And this is why there is no sound in a vacuum.)

The hum is interwoven with some very low level "artificially pleasurable" sound of running water from that fountain (*as if there is a stream, sound that simulates an illusion, oh... the hum can't be disguised though, baba!*). The running water may be louder than its own hum, because firstly, I selectively hear it; secondly, it has a higher frequency than the pump (even of the same amplitude, sound with a higher frequency may catch more attention and seems louder. This is called the masking effect). My window is only half open, so the ambient sound (amplitude or dynamics or sound level) of the outside doesn't overwhelm the one inside (*mainly the computer hum*).

An airplane just flies over our apartment building-- not loud, but dominant (*the sound most recognized among others*). Then, I hear some conversations, also from the right through the window -- a woman's voice, but very low. I can hardly hear the words (the voice is mere sound, which is not language that we can derive meanings from). There is no sound other than, ops... I almost forgot the sound of my fingers typing the keyboard (*I didn't realize it in the beginning. I tried to figure out the sounds I feel most uneasy with, like the hum, and sounds from farther away first than those closest to me, which are my own hands, mmmm... it tells something...*).

Now, I listen to the whole soundscape again. I realize some sounds come and go, rendering some forms of rhythms (*airplanes, conversations*) that are also directional (as the subjects move), whereas others stay as a lasting ambient (*hum of the pump, running water and hum of my computer*).

It is 7:38pm Wednesday night.

The sounds may explain something about the cultural space and people's ways of life here, in Valencia, California. This may be something Hong Kongers could never auralize (not visualize) regarding the cultural differences resulting from different spatial practices.

Then, I reread the above record of sounds (phonographic notes, notation system). I realize I am mainly listening to hums now in a very quiet environment (typical US residential suburban area).

So, I decided to change the sonic environment. Now, I have my window only 1/3 open and am listening to the new songs from *My Little Airport* (<http://www.mylittleairport.com>). Let the music be the dominant sound, intentionally attempting to cast away the petit illusion of a fantasy stream outside my home and the terrible enemy to my nerves (*hums*).

I sing along with their songs.

Soundscape is a representation that offers various ways to understand culture – ways of life. It is also a very private, personal and cultural mapping. *It is our ways of BEING in the world.*

You might try to auralize my life here in Valencia through that particular soundscape.

Listening vs Hearing: Hey, Listen up!

Before I further explain the idea of phonography, soundscape works and sound-walks, I want to first designate listening, not hearing, to the ways of listening.

We see how we look. Yet, we may not listen to how we hear. We try to explore ways of seeing by revisiting materials on visual representations. Yet, even with many different forms of aural representations, our sense of hearing (and aurality) is never an equal partner with the eyes and the sense of sight. We most probably don't walk on both legs though it seems we do.

We can close our eyes but not our ears. It seems like seeing is selective and hearing is compelling. However, it is exactly the other way round. Hearing is so very selective to the extent that we are seldom aware of what we hear. On the other hand, sound is everywhere, it is produced by every action, any kind of energy and motion. Listening turns out to be not merely a physical reaction on sounds but a way to identify them. Such a focus of our listening attention is very exhausting indeed. From that perspective, we have no choice but to manage hearing as a *selective* action precisely because it is *compelling*.

A sonic environment, rather than a visual one through which we generally understand the world, only exists (in our perception) when listening takes place. Otherwise, it is almost as if it doesn't exist. To realize a sonic environment is a call to attention, "Listen!" Point it out to our minds and the audience's mind, "Hey, listen up!"

It is different from mere hearing.

I am always amazed by how Hong Kongers can dine so comfortably in noisy restaurants. The sonic environment where the decibel and frequency range, texture of sound (timbre) are as complex,

¹ More information here: <http://www.deeplisting.org/>

blatant and alchemic as its people and subjects, is exactly the spatial practices of a city--what this city IS and who we ARE. *The ways we hear, and the capacity and ability of what we can possibly listen to is a way of life embedded in a unique cultural setting. Representations of sonic environments are thus comments to their pertinent cultural setting as well as our ways of life.*

It wouldn't have been possible to find out how we listen to ourselves listen had it not been Edison's invention of the phonograph ² in 1877. Since then, humans were able to listen to ourselves away from our somatic being -- our own presence. People used to speak and listen at the same time spontaneously. We could never travel through time to realize how we and other things sounded like (except when one is in an environment where echo and reflected sound in delay are possible, as a result of sound speed). We only listened to its immediacy.

With a phonograph, we could stay in the present time with a present corporeality to re-listen to what we heard *before* and what we sounded like *before* that is undoubtedly outside our spontaneous and immediate physical and psychological experiences. We could eventually listen to the ways we hear. It is also a reflexive process, for aural experience always functions with memories and personal associations. *What and how we can possibly hear is also who we are (for instance, in the exercise of deep listening I did in the beginning of this writing, I listened to everything else first before my own hands typing).*

Technically, a phonograph is a technology and a machine with which one can record and play back sound/speech. We then realize the ways we speak, the ways things sound. *We listen to ourselves listen.* It also turns writing/reading (aurally) of human experience into a mechanical process and reproduction.

Phonography

In Hong Kong, the art of sound is always associated with music, at most and at first. Sound design for movies/theatre comes second, and third comes sound for video/film art and installation. Seriously, it is a very common and yet limited understanding of what sound art is. This particular list of priorities not only accents what is more important -- in terms of the superior position of conventional art form like classical music but also what is more foreclosing in terms of art forms and the fact that our sense of aurality is never as attended to as the sense of sight.

Again, we never walk on both legs.

Starting from the beginning of this year, I have become very interested in phonography ³, which means sound art composed *by audio field recording* (田野錄音). It may be just straight field recording (selected segments), or a composed soundscape by various sound clips.

Here is a very good explanation by Joel Smith:

"The word 'phonography' speaks to me precisely because, like 'photography,' it is agnostic; I mean it's factual rather than semantically loaded like 'music' or 'art' -- words that signal worthy ambitions and hierarchies that may, or may not, help you hear (or see) fresh. 'Phonography' (translated literally) says nothing but: soundwriting. To me as a listener that means: audio 'read' -- sound attended to -- for any revelations and resonances it turns up -- not only those that music knows how to handle, but the whole thing. (What does 'audience' mean, after all?). Space, narrative, pain, hypnotism, temperature -- a sound's interesting dimension might be anywhere. Once you've listened to unauthored sounds in that spirit, music too sounds richer, more deeply authored (by the inventor of the drum, for example): fuller of history and space. Any time a sound is selected -- whether recorded, or just singled out ('listen!') -- attention has already transformed it." ⁴

Yitzchak Dumiel's *What Is Phonography?* provides another very precise and concise explanation:

"The simple answer is that phonography (literally 'sound-writing') refers to field-recording. This entails the capture of any event that can be reproduced and represented as sound. Auditory events are selected, framed by duration and method of capture, and presented in a particular format and context, all of which distinguishes a recording from the original event during which it was captured. In this respect, phonography is analogous to any other form of recording. It is distinct from recording in general only to the extent that the capture of sound is privileged over its production. This bias reflects an attempt to discover rather than invent." ⁵

I personally adore phonography exactly because it is a journey of discovery, for the (sonic and cultural) environments as well as myself (critical and reflective). In addition, it is also a very interesting practice to realize our ways of life, our culture. And so, to a certain extent, it is also a research methodology very close to ethnography though it is much more self-reflexive and operates solely through aurality. It is a revisit to our sense of listening, to our corporeality, to our beings, and culture.

² In 1857 Edouard-Leon Scott first introduced the phonautograph, a machine to record sound to a visible medium with no playback function. But to turn sound into a written/readable/comprehensible system was innovative. In 1877, Charles Cros, a French scientist, developed the first theory of phonograph. (See <http://en.wikipedia.org>). There are differences in naming devices and concepts of sound recording in American and British English. In UK, "gramophone" was often used to mean a machine producing sound from a record. "Phonograph" is more an American term.

³ Phonography could also mean shorthand (I remember the classmates who didn't make it to universities and studied at night school would learn shorthand to prepare themselves to work as a secretary which is still a pretty well-off job in the mid 80's). (See wiki: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shorthand>) It is a sound-write/read system because shorthand is a method to record speech with precise meanings into something visible. It is similar to the dB meter, waveform patterns in our computer screens-- we can "view" sound to understand it.

⁴ The Word "phonography" by Joel Smith <http://www.phonography.org/word.htm>

⁵ What is Phonography? by Yitzchak Dumiel <http://www.phonography.org/whatis.htm>





Sound walks

As there is too much to write in one essay, this part is more on the concept of sound walks rather than the gears.⁶ There are some links here for reference on gears:

<http://www.phonography.org/gear.htm>

http://www.trubitt.com/gield_1.html

<http://www.pugetsoundman.com>

Regarding the pioneer of sound-walks, Andra McCartney wrote, "Pierre Schaffer was one of the earliest composers to work with tape recordings of 'concrete' sounds in Paris during the 1940's."⁷ Schaffer fastened microphones to his fingers tips so as to accentuate the sound of his body reacting on certain space.

With the development of the different types of microphones that render various pick-up patterns and sensibilities to dynamics and frequencies, we can stress certain sound in a recording as a response to capture/represent sonic specificities of that very space.

The sonic environment is very complex. We don't hear one type of sound. We listen to everything at the same time; that is, sounds among a pool of sounds. Sometimes, certain sound is dominant.⁸ Sometimes, to listen is to grasp an isolated sound out of the equalized muddy soundscape. By using certain types of microphone in certain positions, it is possible to single out a sound among others (that can but not necessarily be exactly the same as what we listen). We listen through the gear, after our ways of listening. Sound clips obtained are from the gears, not our ears. It is like how we shoot by camera/lens after the ways of seeing. Images captured are results of mechanical recording, not our eyes. So, we have to understand our gears and use them as closely as part of our body reacting to different environments.

Phonography is not mere documentation of sonic environments. It is about aurality. Hence, to a large extent, it is always subjective, and reflexive to the recordists' physical reactions. Sound walk is a very precise practice/example.

⁶ If you are interested in the gears for field recording, please feel free to write me and further discuss, though I am not a professional sound recordist and only know limited technical stuff -- almost everything is self-learned other than my film/video production training.

⁷ McCartney, Andra, "Soundscape Works, Listening, And the Touch of Sound" in Drobnick, Jim (ed.) *Aural Cultures*. 2004. Toronto: YYZ Book. p.181.

⁸ In a way, you can record it to make it less or even not dominant. It is the phonographers' own artistic decisions. For example, human voice would be very important in a street scene but you can deliberately dilute it by manipulating the microphones' positions.

⁹ <http://www.sfu.ca/~truax/wsp.html>

¹⁰ They released CDs for this project.

¹¹ McCartney, Andra, "Soundscape Works, Listening, And the Touch of Sound" in Drobnick, Jim (ed.) *Aural Cultures*. 2004. Toronto: YYZ Book. p.179-180.

¹² Ibid., p.183

¹³ Ibid., p.183

Back in the 60's and 70's, a soundscape project -- The World Soundscape Project (WSP) was set up in the first place by an educational and research group led by R. Murray Schafer at Simon Fraser University.⁹ It started as a research in a class about noise pollution. They attempted to draw attention to the sonic environment in Canada. Their method of field recording -- soundwalks, as well as such projects as The Vancouver Soundscape¹⁰ are ground-breaking works. "A soundwalk is an exploration of, and an attempt to understand, the sociopolitical and sonic resonances of a particular location via the act of listening. Soundwalks originated as a research tool by the World Soundscape Project."¹¹

McCartney has a vibrant description (an analogy of jazz music) on soundwalk:

"A soundwalk is an improvisation with the sounds of a place. While saxophones and bongo drums are playing instruments, a microphone is primarily a listening instrument. Whereas a jazz improviser works with melodic and rhythmic lines and harmonic progressions, a sound walk recordist improvises with perspective, motion and proximity. In a jazz solo, it is possible to hear how intimately the soloist knows the other members of the band, how well he or she can anticipate their progressions, the energy that is born of surprises in the way the band works together. In a soundwalk recording, it is partly how well recordists know a place that determines a recording's success."¹²

We improvise to react to others' actions within a very unique spatial arrangement and sonic specificities. McCartney further elaborates on the rationale and techniques of recording in soundwalks:

"Soundwalks, however, are not innocent encounters. Using focus and perspectives, it is possible to alter the dynamic hierarchy of sounds within a place. The microphone allows the recordists to discover and attend to the subtle sonic emanations of very small sounds. Often masked to too quiet to be heard normally, these sounds can be elevated into audibility. Their social significance may be heightened or altered dramatically. Sound walks thus record a specific interactions with a place, one in which the microphone constructs a particular experience, and within which the recordists' motions remain audible."¹³

Nevertheless, unlike McCartney's method, I may not always go to places where I am familiar with, especially when I live in a place that is not my home city. To articulate it by appropriating his vivacious analogy on music -- rather than a jazz musician, I might be a post-punk musician who improvises alone in a garage with a Lo-Fi 4 track recorder, a 80's Roland drum machine and a second-hand fender telecaster. I intentionally let the environments surprise me. That very surprise is a self-reflexive act and is reflexive to the medium as well.

I don't take soundwalks as mere innocent adventures. I am very aware of the changing environments and the gears I (choose to) use, together with how my body moves according to that space (corporeality). I constantly ask myself these questions:

- 1) Which positions/directions should I and the microphone should BE in so as to get the best sound of the subjects/objects I prefer?
- 2) Will I move or stay in one position?
- 3) Even if I stay in one position, do I move my microphone?
- 4) How do I balance the dynamics and frequencies of the sound that I want most among other sounds?
- 5) Why do I want to stress certain sound among others?
- 6) How do I react to something that suddenly comes up (this is very common) when I am capturing something I have planned?
- 7) Will dialogues be part of the recording and why?

To explore various practices, sometimes I leave everything as a spontaneous act. Sometimes, I don't even listen when I am recording once I have fixed the recorder to a proper position. It is an individual practice that depends on your bodily and psychological conditions. *It is YOUR OWN practice.*

Personally, I started sound walks as a resistance to the way of life in L.A., especially car culture, and to express concern on my panic attacks resulted from driving. It is a cultural research methodology, as well as a personal and private tool of resistance. In other words, it is also a toolbox for survival through critical ears (instead of critical eyes) on cultural specificities. My sound blog project Soundmarking Landmark: Remapping Tourist Spots ¹⁴ is a practice and experiment of the above ideas.

The sound art piece I did for YAEGO Sound Art Price ¹⁵ originates from this sound blog project. I composed a piece called *Mapping Trainscape* ¹⁶ with recordings from train stations in L.A. and Santa Clarita. The fact that I chose to remap trainscape does not only express my life in L.A. (I can't drive on highways) as a self-reflexive statement, but it is also a critical comment on the spatial practices of L.A.. Though *Mapping Trainscape*, as an individual piece, is more personal and emotional, the sound blog project, as a whole, can amplify more the idea of cultural practices and criticism.

¹⁴ My project: <http://www.soundmarketing.net>.
My Artist Statement of the project is here: <http://www.soundmarketing.net/blog/C1148490103/E906614779/index.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.etat.com/bias/page-news.html>

¹⁶ <http://aahsun.com/wpblog/?p=15>

To sum up, I would like to accent one essential point. If it is possible (yet it all depends on each individual's conditions), we should pay more attention to "listening" and sonic environments so as to discover and realize the ways we live and the ways our beloved societies exist. *Art works, whatever the names and the tokens, only happen and have their effects after this simple act.* One last note: not all phonographers have this stance. This is my own consideration and practice of phonography in which hopefully, *multiple (genuine) interdisciplinary trajectories merging cultural activism with art, academia with living, technicality with everyday-life practice, and everyday-life-ness (cultural) with the political, are possible.*

Anson recommends further surfing at:

Hildegard Westerkamp, Hildegard, *Listening to the Listening*

This paper was presented as a participant in the ISEA '95 Panel Presentation: Sounding Out Genders: Women Sound Artists/Composers Talk about Gender and Technology.

<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/wfae/readings/Westerkamp.html>

Earthear, environmental sound art galleries:

<http://earthear.com/index.html>

Here is a web site on free sound clips from field recordings under a Creative Common Lisence

<http://freesound.iaa.upf.edu/>

London first radio art station. There you don't listen to crappy and creepy dj talking but various kind of sound art and music. They also do podcast now

<http://www.resonancefm.com/>

For the different labels which release phonography works:

<http://www.phonography.org/links.htm>

I did buy from and/OAR9 (<http://www.and-oar.org/>) and they have pretty good stuff.

On accretions, try this:

<http://www.accretions.com/catalog/phonographersunion.asp>