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Field Recordings: A Manifesto

Abstract: The article focuses on the political implications of field recording (FR) in relation to sound ecology, education, art, and technology. On the one hand, it discusses how FR can protect us as a social tool in a paradoxical relationship between FR as an artistic practice and social networks that motivate alienation. On the other hand, it addresses the difference between what we perceive as sonic properties used for aesthetic purposes and what neural networks compute to create their internal structures in the process of artificial intelligence. This article adopts a preliminary approach to the above-mentioned topics while it seeks to raise questions and awareness. Drawing upon such theorists as Voegelin, Steingo and Sykes, LaBelle, and Agostinho, it adopts a pragmatic perspective on everyday life and its political implications.

Keywords: field recording, political sound, sonic data, sound ecology, acoustic care, sound conscious

Introduction

[T]he modern soundscape: at one end, that which is beneath notice; at the other, that which cannot be ignored.¹

This essay emerges from a few moments of realization in my artistic and academic practices. It probably results from fluctuating between different environments, *modi operandi*, and foci of attention. When you work as a sound designer for film and video art, an acousmatic composer, an academic researcher, and a teacher... all topics start to mix and blur. When you work with your ears, your ears never stop working.

In 2017, Brandon LaBelle presented the idea of sound as a “tool of care” at the *Sounding Out of Space* conference in Dublin.² This, in combination with the “Building Archives for Evidence and Collective Resistance” presentation at

¹ D. Suisman, S. Strasser, *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Philadelphia 2011, p. 2.

² B. LaBelle, “Minor Acoustics,” keynote presentation, *Sounding Out the Space: An International Conference on the Spatiality of Sound*, Dublin, 3 November 2017.

Transmediale 2019, raised several questions about sound, art, and politics which I am going to explore in the present article.³ It is a wide range of different topics which affect me in different ways and concern sound studies. For example, what is the role of a sound artist in the context of technological changes that affect our sonic behaviour and health? How does our relationship with sound change depending on the social and artistic context? Or, for instance, what about the imminent danger of overexposure to sound and hearing damage caused by regular and loud sound events and personal earphones? Can sound art afford contradictions? What does it take for sound to be political?

As a sound maker I wished my practices were more reflective of my political values. Some time ago, I attempted to make an explicit statement with a composition. Although I believe everything is a statement, carries political implications, and results from an active choice, I thought I would be more open about this particular topic in one piece. Due to the nature of the sounds themselves, I thought the message would be clear. It was not. First of all, some people did not even realize what the sound was. Second, even if they did, my point in giving voice to this sound did not come across. I thought that “to listen is to become sensitive,”⁴ but it made no difference, even if they realized what it was, and guessed my statement behind it, they remained indifferent to the subject. It seemed that it had no impact on them.⁵

A few years later, I composed a piece for the filmmaker Salomé Lamas within her project *Interventions* (2016). She used stills and fragments from several Portuguese films (both fiction and documentary) for an online exhibition. I was expected to create a composition which would accompany the stills. While watching all these films, I came to the conclusion that each generation used the same strategies and made similar statements. In a way, these films sounded very alike. Eventually, that similitude led me to platforms such as Freesound.org or YouTube in order to listen to sounds of various protests around the globe. From the Arab Spring through Occupy Wall Street to the mass protests in Spain or Greece in 2010. No matter what language, acoustics, or recording technology is used, the sounds of protests are the same everywhere. They all share a moving force, a sense of collective, and a beat. I ended up sampling core sentences from the films (such as “the people

³ In fact, at Transmediale 2019 it wasn't just the presentations that made me wonder why and how far behind is sound research in the digital era. I also wondered how far contradiction can go when I was struck by the difference between content and practice: during an event filled with presentations about gender issues, which took place at a bookstore filled with literature on feminism, it was unfortunate to see that the sound crew was exclusively male, while the production team was mostly female.

⁴ D. Cecchetto, “Algorithms, Affect, and Aesthetic Listening,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, eds. M. Cobussen, V. Meelberg, B. Truax, London 2016, p. 413.

⁵ Excerpt can be accessed at <https://soundcloud.com/sarapini/cries-miniature-str> (accessed 12.02.2022).

united will never be defeated”/“o povo unido jamais será vencido”) as well as iconic sounds from Portuguese culture, such as the sound of marching footsteps that appears in the opening of Zeca Afonso’s classic “Grândola Vila Morena” (a hallmark of the Carnation Revolution). But, in spite of the meaning embedded in sounds, the references go unnoticed even by the Portuguese listener, as they become a collective “moving force,” sounding like any other protest in the world.⁶

Drawing on these two experiences, I asked again, what does it take for sound to be political? Is the sound of a pig being slaughtered more political than the sound of, let’s say, a coffee machine? Does the recording of birds fall more into the category of sound ecology than the recording of my backyard? Does it depend on whether the artist embedded meaning in one or the other? Is it about significance? Symbolism? What about the artistic value that goes beyond this intended significance? For example, where does the value of Robert Morris’s *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) lie? Is it about the idea itself — conceptual, compact, and self-sufficient, simple and accessible on one hand, and complex and intricate on the other? Or is it about the acoustic properties of the sound which provide the experience?

And what about all the choices that led me to record the pig being slaughtered? Should I make any political statements while I hold a piece of technology so strongly related to a capitalist structure based on economic and geographic inequalities? Where does my microphone come from, and where does the coffee come from? Who made it for me, and under what conditions? Should we discuss the relationship between politics and sound while buying unethical technology to make our recordings or unethical clothes to speak publicly about these topics? Should we discuss sound ecology, but travel by plane to record nearly extinct species and exquisite locations? Is a recording from a food market in The Hague less political than a recording of Fukushima? In other words, field recording (FR) as an art form in itself should take these questions into consideration.

In this spirit, this article intends to reflect upon our relationship with sound, encompassing both artistic and social practices. What is FR (“for the record”) and how does it communicate (“for the ears”)? What is sound ecology, what is the political (“for the care”), and what is sonic data (“for the data”)? This perspective addresses the political implications of our sound choices (artistic or not), especially in relation to technology, as “each technology carries within it a reflection of the ideology that it was crafted in the context of.”⁷ The following exposition adopts an elementary approach to the above-mentioned topics.

⁶ This composition can be accessed at <https://soundcloud.com/sarapini/riots-and-rituals> (accessed 12.02.2022).

⁷ Return Fire, “Caught in the Net — Notes from an Era of Cybernetic Delirium,” *Return Fire 4* (supplement), 2016, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/return-fire-vol-4-supplement-caught-in-the-net> (accessed 12.02.2022).

For the Record

In *Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility*, Mowitt opens up perspectives for applying Benjamin's concepts to nonmusical sonic artworks as well. For instance, [...] the genuineness of an artifact bearing witness to a specific time and place are crucial to the aesthetic of an increasing number of artistic practices that have been emerging across various genres of acoustic art in recent years. These practices share a concern with political issues, and they all address these issues by using field recordings from specific places with particular historical or social significance.⁸

FR is an evolving topic related to multiple media fields. Despite not being considered a field *per se* for a long time, it has belonged to almost every media field. Its origins can be traced back to acoustic ecology with Murray Schaffer popularizing the term “soundscape” and with the idea that the world can be observed — and understood — through sound.⁹ It also stems from Pierre Schaeffer's early experiments and his tape recording of a train (1948), which allowed him to manipulate the sound and turn it into something else, anything else. It showed the infinite possibilities of recorded sound. And if this was the foundation of concrete music as we know it, decades earlier, Dziga Vertov had already tried something similar. He called it *Kino Pravda* (1922), a pre-documentation of the coming Industrial Revolution. Later on, his interest in sound resulted in the film entitled *Enthusiasm* (Vertov, 1931), an ode to machines.

Here and there, we find the first artists showing interest in exploring sound's capacity to document its social context.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the accessibility to technology democratized the access to sound recording. It was a slow progression from optical sound and wax cylinders to semi-digital (DAT) and then purely digital (disks).¹¹ It became portable, which made it a subject of interest across various multimedia without depending so much on economic power. Although FR is not an entirely uncommon practice in film, experimental, and mainstream music (hip

⁸ G. Fiebig, “The Sonic Witness: On the Political Potential of Field Recordings in Acoustic Art,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 25, 2015, pp. 14–16, https://doi.org/10.1162/lmj_a_00926.

⁹ R.M. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Rochester 1993.

¹⁰ In recent years, multiple approaches have challenged the biases of the “pioneer narrative.” As Morgan posits, “pioneers narrative can provoke a particular disquiet, intensifying boundaries rather than dissolving them.” See F. Morgan, “Pioneer Spirits: New Media Representations of Women in Electronic Music History,” *Organised Sound* 22, 2017, no. 2, pp. 238–249, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771817000140>.

¹¹ See, for example, J. Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham 2003.

hop in particular), anthropology, ethnography, ecology, “field recording” is often associated primarily with “sound artists.”¹²

That being said, what qualifies a recording as a field recording? Does it have to be made in a field? Indoors versus outdoors? Is a recording of a particular landscape more of a field recording than a recording of the club next door? Is FR always political? These questions seem very reductive. After all, any recording outside a controlled sound studio can be treated as a field recording. As a matter of fact, this is the distinction implied in John Levack Drever’s “in-here” and “out-there” formulation of the transition between the controlled and acoustically treated environment and the outer world of unexpected events.¹³

However, it seems that contextualization is the key. If a recordist goes to a train station to record a “wild atmo” for the sound design of a film, it is... a wild atmosphere of the train station. If the same sound is to be presented in a gallery installation, at a concert or in a performance, then it would be a field recording. By acknowledging the political implications of field recordings, one would confirm Lehmann’s idea that “political engagement does not consist in the topics but in the forms of perception.”¹⁴ By the same token, if the chosen location was more critical and had more obvious connotations with political issues, it would easily fall into the category of political act or sound ecology. It seems that more emphasis is put on making field recordings, especially in hostile environments, rather than on what it actually communicates or how it sounds. In this sense, the political or ecological relevance of a recording lies in the extent to which it contributes to the understanding of the issues it amplifies.

In spite of that, FR should be treated in technical terms, like playing the violin, rather than as an indexical process that conveys meaning through words and interpretations. FR is a technique from the moment we choose which type of microphone we are going to use, and understanding it leads to a specific approach to that sound. Also, FR is a technique as for the way we record — from the way we operate the microphone to the way we choose to approach the recording site. FR is a technique as for the way we have to behave while recording and the way we choose to share these sounds: raw, manipulated, augmented, transformed. FR is a technique because all these choices affect the way the sounds are perceived, and that too matters (as does the content). FR is a technique because it contributes

¹² See, for example, J.L. Drever, “Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music,” *Organised Sound* 7, 2002, pp. 21–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771802001048>.

¹³ J.L. Drever, “Field Recording Centered Composition Practices: Negotiating the ‘Out-There’ with the ‘In-Here,’” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, eds. M. Cobussen, V. Meelberg, B. Truax, London 2016, pp. 71–80.

¹⁴ H.T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, quoted after D. Kulezic-Wilson, *Sound Design Is the New Score: Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack*, New York 2019, p. 92.

to a shared sonic culture, which is the most direct way to create a society that cares about their ears. FR is cultural agency.

For the Ears

Some time ago, the *Leonardo Music Journal* devoted an entire issue to the politics of sound art (2015), which included a number of articles discussing various historical perspectives on the topic and asking various composers to reflect upon the political engagement of their own works. Based on their reflections, it might be said that this engagement is characterized by two factors: *agency* and *intentionality*. Firstly, agency implies a certain level of subjectivity and contextualization. I suspect, however, this conceals the recording, making it dependent and exclusive. Secondly, the main purpose of FR as a political tool should be its ability to engage, share and embrace context without exclusivity, borders, or intellectual ownership.

Furthermore, the idea of intentionality itself is twofold, as it involves the maker's intentions, which in turn should translate into the receiver's interpretation. This is the same as forcing *poiesis* to become *esthesis*, that is, assuming that the creative processes that generate the work and contain the author's intentions will become the processes that the receivers undertake when receiving the work. Thus, to question intentionality and interpretation is to liberate the work from citationality, which is embodied in the "dogma of intentionalism."¹⁵ Interpretations are assumptions and assumptions are speculative. The "thing" (the sound) becomes the object of the assigned meaning rather than the experience thereof. According to Sontag, "interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there."¹⁶ Additionally, "interpretation is never anything more than a proposal,"¹⁷ which can become a "form of censorship"¹⁸ and a projection of the self, as in Dusman's "individual identity."¹⁹ It is a projection of the "interpreter" onto the "interpreted," mirroring the projection of the "maker" onto the "made." Finally, both intentionality and interpretation imply cultural assumptions, "all mapped by metaphoric implication onto the original binary: Self/Other."²⁰ Neither intentionality nor interpretation should limit the possibilities of sounds to be something other than the listener's guess.

¹⁵ M. Bal, S. Marx-MacDonald, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto 2002, p. 180.

¹⁶ S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London 2009, p. 13.

¹⁷ M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto 1997, p. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁹ L. Dusman, "Unheard-Of: Music as Performance and the Reception of the New," *Perspectives of New Music* 32, 1994, no. 2, pp. 130–146, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833601>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

This identification is limiting and closed on its own. It limits sounds to representation, as “signification creates just another piece of oppositional epistemological discourse: ‘this’ implying ‘not-this,’ ‘that’ implying ‘not-that.’”²¹ The meaning of sound, or the entire sonic experience, is a thought sustained by the listener’s intuition.²² If the work relies upon intentionality, the work is reduced to representing that intention. However, that purpose or intention should either surpass the work and become the experience, or it is not present in the work. Although Nancy notes that to listen is to always be “on the edge of meaning,”²³ to state that the sound “means something” is an effective identification with a possible source, idea or sensation. In line with that, FR should not mean anything other than the experience it provides. If the recording is self-contained, these specific issues would translate into the experience itself.

For the Care

Sound and music are absorbed by individuals — with varying modes of consciousness and interpretation — and then converted into kinetic and social modes of engaging with others, with the potential to mobilize various kinds of political work in the world.²⁴

The possibility of documenting everything has allowed for important advances in our society. Some of them are popular and large-scale and others are minor but very important. For example, showing evidence of attacks denied by political forces in the Syrian conflict. Although the attacks were not covered by the mainstream media, civilians documented everything with their phones and immediately shared the videos on Facebook. By cross-referencing the information in the videos, tracking their geographic location, and synchronizing all the information, they were able to prove the attacks.²⁵ In a way, it questions the monopoly in surveillance technology: instead of favouring those in power, it gives voice to those affected by it.

Although not a sonic achievement in itself, the rawness of the sound enhances the impact of the videos. The analysis of auditory experiences in the context of vio-

²¹ Ibid., p. 137.

²² See D. Sheerin, *Deleuze and Ricoeur: Disavowed Affinities and the Narrative Self*, New York 2011.

²³ J.L. Nancy, *Listening*, New York 2007, p. 7.

²⁴ J. Rodgers, “Approaching Sound,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. J. Sayers, New York 2018, p. 237.

²⁵ Paper presentation by Hadi Al Khatib at Transmediale 2019 “Building Archives for Evidence and Collective Resistance.”

lence has also proven, according to Ana Maria Ochoa, that “[o]ne of the characteristics of violence is the redefinition of acoustic space.”²⁶ In that regard, “sound [is] not examined as the cause of violent action but rather as symbolic resources that actors can mobilize in processes of violence.”²⁷ In other words, it can and has been used as a so-called “non-lethal” weapon.²⁸ According to Szendy, and “following Nietzsche, we could say that the extent of the development of their listening is measured by the degree of fear.”²⁹ Thinking along the same lines, Yoganathan proposes the “term aural counterpublics to amplify marginalised voices and soundscapes of resistance suppressed by mainstream news and governmental rhetoric” inspired by Tom Rice’s observations on “how prisoners are often active rather than passive listeners to their everyday oppressive soundscapes.”³⁰ And so, sound can advocate both for and against violence. In short, loudness, noise, and technology are tools of power: “Sound, a terra incognita to be explored, is a manifestation of the imagination of power.”³¹

This political power of sound had been suggested by Brandon LaBelle in his concept of “sonic agency.”³² Accordingly, the author proposes the idea of “sound as a shelter” which undertakes listening as “a process of inhabitation” and echoes the concepts of space and embodiment. Drawing upon Dyson’s “shared sensibility,” he proposes a political life affording “dialogical exchange” and sound as “conducive to empathy and compassion.” Agency stems from sound’s itinerant nature “that explicitly unsettle[s] borders” and therefore shapes a “coming community” held upon a sense of belonging and shared space.³³ In reference to Szendy, Kane states that listening is “a practice whose essence always requires the presence of another: another listener, another work, another performer, another instrument. Listening is never reduced to sensory stimuli, or even a perceptual phenomenology.”³⁴ In other words, one doesn’t speak if no one is listening.³⁵

²⁶ L. Velasco-Puffeau, “Introduction: Sound, Music and Violence,” *Transposition, Hors-série 2*, 2020, p. 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁸ See J. Volcler, *Extremely Loud: Sound as a Weapon*, New York 2015. It is also possible to listen to *Sonic Weapons* at <https://archive.org/details/alg052> (accessed 15.02.2022).

²⁹ P. Szendy, *All Ears: The Aesthetics of Espionage*, New York 2016, p. 31.

³⁰ N. Yoganathan, “Soundscapes of Resistance: Amplifying Social Justice Activism and Aural Counterpublics through Field Recording-Based Sound Practices,” *Organised Sound* 26, 2021, no. 2, pp. 201–210.

³¹ J. Volcler, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³² B. LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, London 2020.

³³ LaBelle refers to the coming community as a spontaneous gathering of protest groups or to the arrival of refugees. See also G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis 1993.

³⁴ B. Kane, “Review of Peter Szendy. 2008. *Listen: A History of Our Ears*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press,” *Current Musicology* 86, 2008, pp. 145–155, <https://doi.org/10.7916/cm.v0i86.5148>.

³⁵ This is an analogy to the riddle “if a tree falls in the forest.” See S. Pinheiro, J. Rouš, “Reflections on Sound Associations and Sonic Digital Environments,” *Resonance* 3, 2022, no. 3, in press.

Salomé Voegelin also proposes the idea of listening as a process of inhabitation as part of her research on the “political possibility of sound.”³⁶ For her, “sound is an alternative perspective, it is a slice of the actual world, sound is a portal to imagination and an access point not only to itself, opening experience towards a sonic materiality, but also to the experience of a radical realism, to the idea of the world not as an absolute real but as an indexical real — the way the world is or the way we perceive it to be is one way which doesn’t impede it from being different, something else.”³⁷ This is because sound is a medium of respect for the other — and listening is a form of being attentive and staying connected and a tool of care. From this perspective, both LaBelle’s and Voegelin’s proposals echo Nancy’s view of sound as a medium of sharing.³⁸ For example, according to Rodgers, “anyone who has joined with others in voicing a collective chant or cheer at a sporting event or political rally, or who has felt empowered by the sonic rush of a high-volume concert, has sensed this process by which sound and music elicit embodied experiences of identity and community.”³⁹ It provides a sense of belonging, shareness, and empowerment. As Barthes posits, “before anything else, the first thing that the power imposes is a rhythm” (a rhythm of life, time, thought, and speech).⁴⁰

In fact, it happens in many different environments. It happens in collective protests, heavily based on the synchronicity of rhythms and patterns.⁴¹ It happens in groups of skateboarders where sound is an undeniable part of their experience, sense of community, and achievements. It is a direct consequence of their actions, which translate into using or not using a certain technique, marking their presence in usually highly reverberant spaces which is also part of their social statement. It also happens in football stadiums where the chants create an atmosphere that empowers both the players and the fans and is different, for example, from basketball events; and, finally, it also happens in work and domestic places, where a combination of several sounds creates an impression of familiarity and habituation (humming fridges, ventilators, backyards, etc.). Therefore, we get accustomed to environments that enhance our sense of belonging.

What does it mean when we delegate this capacity? What does it mean when we actively choose to cover our ears in public spaces, isolating ourselves in a bubble of music, podcasts or phone calls? Why is this more appealing than listen-

³⁶ S. Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound: Fragments of Listening*, New York 2018.

³⁷ Paper presentation at Fase in 2016.

³⁸ J.L. Nancy, op. cit.

³⁹ J. Rodgers, op. cit.

⁴⁰ R. Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, New York 2013. See also H. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, New York–London 2004.

⁴¹ T. Rennie, “Power Struggles: The Politics of Composing with Sounds of Protest,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 25, 2015, pp. 17–20.

ing to our environment? Would we walk down the street blindfolded? Because that's how it feels to cover my ears in public: if I cannot hear my environment, I bump into other people, cross the street when I should not (and I see that happening all the time) and most of all, send a message saying "I am not interested in listening to you." Obviously, it is possible to understand the context that made people need to cover their ears in public and to create their "individualized sound-world."⁴² But this is about the long-term consequences. And at the same time, we store videos, recordings, and photos of every single step of our way. We isolate ourselves from the people around us, but we share all these moments with remote people. We allow all of our personal information to be collected by applications, grant access to the microphones and cameras in our devices, we expose our private sphere in the public cloud. It seems to me that we constantly live in two parallel realities. As much as I would like to discuss this contradiction, the main question is: what happens to all this data?

For the Data

Why is it that the sense of sight, in its shift to datafication, is being mobilised and recast through the modern, un-situated observing subject who aims to render the world as knowable through amplification of senses?⁴³

What kind of information can sonic data convey? From the artistic perspective, there is a significant boundary between the term "data" (the algorithmic storage of information in neural networks) and sonic data defined by Schaeffer, who suggested that we all listen to the sounds and their sonic content (frequency, pitch, rhythm, gesture, etc.), regardless of their meaning or source. On the one hand, Schaeffer (also Varèse with Wen-Chung, and many others) told us to listen to the acoustic properties and the sonic content without paying attention to what the sound means, where it comes from, etc. On the other hand, the idea of sonic data is to translate sound into some sort of tangible information.

And yet sound can be used in medical diagnostics, while "sonic logging" is commonly used to predict seismic occurrences or to explore oil fields. NASA, for example, invested in sonification to communicate highly complex ideas to a gen-

⁴² M. Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*, London 2000, p. 3; J.L. Drever, "Field Recording Centered Composition Practices."

⁴³ D. Agostinho, "The Optical Unconscious of Big Data: Datafication of Vision and Care for Unknown Futures," *Big Data & Society* 6, 2019, no. 1, pp. 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719826859>.

eral audience and to make their content more sensual.⁴⁴ Their sonification converts data into audible information, usually aiming for harmonies and tones that create a musical experience.⁴⁵ This fits with Alexandra Supper's definition of sonification as "the use of nonspeech audio to convey information. More specifically, sonification is the transformation of data relations into perceived relations in an acoustic signal for the purposes of facilitating communication or interpretation."⁴⁶ Supper also addresses sonification from a musicological perspective while pointing to the obstacles to its implementation. Since sonification "lacks a comprehensive common language,"⁴⁷ it requires negotiation between different fields.

Accordingly, "sonification has been applied to a wide variety of data and phenomena, ranging from seismographic data to election results, from molecular structures to the electrical activity of the brain."⁴⁸ And "it has implications for the self-perception, the composition, the contours, and the size of the community: Who may speak for sonification, and who may not? If the goal is to establish sonification and gain acceptance, is it best to ensure its publicity and popularity (e.g., by being very open to artistic contributions) or to appear as a small but highly professional community of experts?"⁴⁹

What is more, Andrea Polli makes the following distinction between different practices of sonic data: audification — "the process of taking a vibrational signal outside the range of normal human hearing and shifting it into the audible range" — sonification — "the process of translating numerical data into sound" — and her own term geosonification — "the sonification of data from the natural world inspired by the soundscape" — that is, including its location and environment.⁵⁰ The above-mentioned definitions involve a collaboration between scientists and artists, and since this approach implies converting one thing into another, it becomes an analogy, a "humanization" of the data in order to allow "listeners to experience data through their bodies."⁵¹ But all of these processes rely heavily on analogies and contextualizations, and "the recognition accuracy of an auditory display was increased when users were made aware of the display's music-

⁴⁴ See A. Supper, "The Search for the 'Killer Application': Drawing the Boundaries around the Sonification of Scientific Data," [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, eds. T. Pinch, K. Bijsterveld, New York 2012, pp. 249–270.

⁴⁵ This is available at <https://soundcloud.com/nasa> (accessed 14.01.2022).

⁴⁶ G. Kramer et al., *Sonification Report: Status of the Field and Research Agenda*, 1997. See also A. Supper, op. cit., p. 253.

⁴⁷ A. Supper, op. cit., p. 259.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 250.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 266.

⁵⁰ A. Polli, "Soundwalking, Sonification and Activism," [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Soundning Art*, eds. M. Cobussen, V. Meelberg, B. Truax, London 2016, pp. 81–91.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 88.

al design principles.”⁵² In this sense, these approaches highlight a fundamental issue — it may be not enough for this sound to be a sound. It seems that it always has to be compared, converted, and treated as music. Especially in the context of electroacoustic music, which still considers Denis Smalley’s spectromorphologic analysis analogous to the experience of sound.

After all, everything has to be converted to musical perception, as in fantasy, while this idea of FR as a political manifesto would make sound more relatable. The political advocates exposing what was not obvious to the listener before the listening experience. Without romanticization. This advocacy combines agency and awareness. If the goal is to share an understanding of a situation which would otherwise be inaccessible, sonic data should contain everyday contexts: overload and accumulation. Therefore, the question should focus on the organicity of sound rather than its robotization. And in particular it should address the pragmatic issues of our society: sound education, sound health, and sound behaviours. Therefore, Daniela Agostinho’s question is relevant not only for visual studies, but also for sound studies.

Based on Benjamin’s concept, Agostinho proposes the “optical unconscious” in the context of Big Data, struggling with visual metaphors. The original concept “proposes that photography as a visual technology offered unprecedented access to hitherto unnoticed phenomena, either too minuscule or too rapid for the unaided human eye to see,”⁵³ with Agostinho questioning “whether we can take the optical unconscious at play in Big Data, not as a model that extends to Big Data the fantasies of control and mastery offered by modern optics, but as a material-discursive practice that opens up space for the unknown and unknowability.”⁵⁴ Is it possible to start a discussion of the “auditory unconscious” in a non-metaphorical way, especially if we consider Benjamin’s relationship with sound and radio, and the “aestheticizing of politics”?⁵⁵ Is it possible to listen for the sake of listening, engaging, and experiencing? Although there is a permanent access to information, sharing media files as well as spreading and storing (un)content, it is necessary to understand what exactly happens to this data and how it is used in different contexts.

⁵² P. Vickers, B. Hogg, “Sonification Abstraite/Sonification Concrète: An ‘Aesthetic Perspective Space’ for Classifying Auditory Displays in the Ars Musica Domain,” [in:] *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Auditory Display, London, UK June 20–23, 2006*, p. 212.

⁵³ W. Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” [in:] *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, eds. M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Cambridge 1999 [1931], pp. 507–530. See also D. Agostinho, op. cit., p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

⁵⁵ See E.G. Jensen, “Weimar Activism: Walter Benjamin’s Work for Radio,” [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, eds. M. Cobussen, V. Meelberg, B. Truax, London 2016, p. 413.

River of No Return

Drawing upon LaBelle's own proposal of "sonic agency" in combination with Agostinho's "ethics of care," the aim of this exposition was to raise questions about the practical uses and implications of sound, both artistic and social. In fact, my own questions emerged precisely after hearing LaBelle's presentation "Minor Acoustics" in Dublin (2017) and meeting Agostinho at Transmediale (2019), where I finally realized how LaBelle's presentation resonated with me. But my proposal differs from LaBelle's "acoustic resistance" simply because it seeks for a more pragmatic understanding of sound in our everyday life. It seeks for a concrete answer to the question "How can sound actually protect us?" It combines Agostinho's vision of "care," which is heavily informed by feminist theory, and listening practice viewed as a tool of engagement.

Over the past few years, several studies attempted to discuss FR as an artistic practice and explore its possible implementations.⁵⁶ A number of artists and theorists managed to address these concerns in specific case studies, such as Susan Schuppli, or Quintero's testimony on Latino urban sound. These approaches, although well-grounded from a practitioner's perspective, do not allow for an objective understanding of the general traces of FR as a technical practice. They fall into the category of subjective approaches, case studies, and intuitive thoughts. Initially, this paper was meant to explore, discuss, and provide a reflection on sound recording (and data) that would go beyond its artistic uses and subjective considerations. It seemed to me it was necessary to acknowledge and embrace the fact that the relationship between individuals, society, and sound has significantly changed over the last few years, or perhaps even decades. Therefore, it seemed crucial to place these discussions of sound, art, ecology, and political engagements within the current social and industrial contexts. An artistic discussion engages with political responsibility and approaches an idea of listening as a tool of care: inclusive, attentive, conscious.

While thinking about this, it occurred to me that the Google search engine has an "image" and even "video" category but no "sound" category. Why is that? Why is sound not useful as a search result and a carrier of information? Particularly in this period, there are more and more lectures, conferences, and talks, and on top of that there is a growing number of podcasts. Why is not all this content categorized and catalogued soundwise? From a purely pragmatic point of view, it seems clear to me that "sound information" simply cannot be as monetized as images yet. Is sound not sensual enough?

For that reason, when I first started this essay I targeted smartphones, social media, and the overload of information of contemporary society as the main

⁵⁶ C. Lane, A. Carlyle, *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording*, Axminster 2013; C. Lane, A. Carlyle, *Sound Arts Now*, Axminster 2021.

issues, the so-called digital dementia. These questions sought to explore how the information is stored or used by the companies that own it and how these tools influence and manipulate our social relationships. I wondered what this new society of control actually is and what role sound plays in it. For example, people record and share sounds with each other in group chats, creating a back-and-forth monologue with no interruptions.⁵⁷ Isn't that the actual point of sharing a conversation? This alternating way of communication makes listening fragmented. It is not a conversation. How far does this affect our relationships? To what extent are our relationships mediated by these tools? At the same time, what does happen to all this information? Where is it stored and how is it used? What happens to all these media files? Where is the border-line between domestic use and public domain? Despite how much the private sphere was challenged by the periods of isolation, quarantine, and lockdown, the use of these tools voluntarily contributes to the "eavesdropping tendencies of technology."⁵⁸

However, the direction has changed. Mostly because I realized it all starts with the way we educate our ears. It seems to me that very often we do not understand how sound works and how it does what it does. There are many acoustic, technical, conceptual, and artistic misconceptions about sound itself. Perhaps this happens mostly because we take it for granted, because we doom it to interpretation, because we live in an anthropocentric society, and also because our awareness of sound is (contradictory) unconscious.

From my perspective, even sound design and sound film contributed to this miseducation. In sound post-production for film, various strategies are adopted to polish the listening experience or emphasize some qualities for dramatic purposes, for example the sound of a scene is cleaned up and isolated, and the frequency spectrum is adjusted and compressed. We, filmmakers and soundmakers, present a product that has been highly polished and manipulated. It is meant to represent reality and the contemporary environment... but it doesn't. It is misleading. We worship pristine sound. And it contributes primarily to a misconception of space and its acoustics, but most importantly, it creates collective expectations and assumptions about sound culture and sonic experience.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ According to Alexandre Maros, Jussara Almeida, Fabrício Benevenuto, and Marisa Vasconcelos, "over 200 million voice messages are sent by WhatsApp every day in some regions" in 2020. See A. Maros et al., "Analyzing the Use of Audio Messages in WhatsApp Groups," [in:] *Proceedings of The World Wide Web Conference WWW 2020*, New York 2020, pp. 3005–3011, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3366423.3380070>.

⁵⁸ B. LaBelle, op. cit., p. 18.

⁵⁹ In another essay, I proposed a take on "film sound syntax." In short, we can think of the clichés that film history has established over the years. Some sounds are purely technical, such as using the sound of closing a door to move to another shot. Others fall somewhere between technical and aesthetic choices, such as the whistling of a kettle of boiling water to convey the idea of growing tension. Yet some of them are meaningful, such as the sound of flies that indicates something disgusting. There are also some habits that have been developed: floors always squeak in quiet

In the meantime, I took part in a project called “Future Landscapes,” created and produced by Tereza Swadoschová, Ivo Bystřičan, and Václav Havelka. The project explores critical locations through sound, resulting in different outcomes (a documentary film, a music album, a podcast, and a web archive). In the Czech expedition, we visited a CO₂ storage depository (SPICER in Žarošice), a coal power plant (in Tusimice), a nature reserve with buffaloes, aurochs, and wild horses (in Milovice), and an aquaponics farm (Future Farming, in Kaly). Since I was responsible for the FR, I chose several different microphones in order to approach the sites from different angles and to provide the team with an exquisite sonic perspective. These choices unfolded a relationship with the sites that was very impressive at first, until I realized that I was forging it into the other members. Undoubtedly, the locations were very impressive and rich in their sonic and political topics. However, the microphones I took with me also provided access to the layers of perception which are unusual to the common visitor. With the use of a contact microphone, a geophone, an electromagnetic sensor, a hydrophone, and a 4-capsule cardioid any site exploration will be exquisite and impressive.⁶⁰

In fact, therein lies the contradiction. We neglect our sense of hearing and at the same time, overwhelm it. Everything should be ultra-sensorial, otherwise it is not attractive enough. Sound needs to be immersive (and always has been), virtual (never will be?), interactive, automated, and algorithmic. This is what is trendy and appeals to the masses. And in the fashion of more is less, we keep adding misinformation to something that is not yet fully understood. We keep ignoring audio frequencies that fall outside our audible spectrum and keep forgetting they also affect our body. We should remember that bodies listen as a whole.⁶¹ This choice of microphones unfolds the immense and constant activity going on around us unconsciously.

This is not the same as saying it is unnoticed, because there is a part of us that feels it and notices it, but does not consciously process it. Just because people in the city are used to the sound of traffic doesn't mean it doesn't affect them.⁶² The sounds in four locations in the Czech Republic were complex, rich, and capable of a political reflection. However, they were strictly related to the context. This context goes beyond the sounds themselves, almost regardless of them. What occurs to me now is that this kind of exploration and reflection should take place

situations, swings are rusty, hearts beat loudly, cats always purr or meow, dogs always bark in villages, we always hear the microphone feedback, etc. For example, a face punch sound is something the entire “film tradition” was built on. There is an expectation of what it should sound like. Sometimes it can be a valuable, such as in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980). See V. LoBrutto, “Ben Burt,” [in:] V. LoBrutto, *Sound-on-Film: Interviews with Creators of Film Sound*, Westport 1994, p. 140.

⁶⁰ The geophone and the electromagnetic sensor are produced by LOM in Slovakia.

⁶¹ See J. Volcler, op. cit.

⁶² H. Jariwala et al., *Noise Pollution & Human Health: A Review*, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319329633_Noise_Pollution_Human_Health_A_Review (accessed 12.02.2022).

everywhere — in our domestic environments, workplaces, and our children’s schools. It is easy to look at a big factory and think about the impact of constant exposure to loud sounds. It is easy to dig a geophone into the ground and hear the foreign electric pulses surrounding a herd, but that is precisely why FR can and should be extended to any location, because every location is worth exploring. In order for sound to protect us, we need to listen to what is around us.

Sound is a form of resistance if we choose to listen to it. Drawing upon Foucault’s biopower and raw politics, Michael B. Quintero writes: “to make silent and let sound.”⁶³ And so, ultimately, this essay explores how FR is always political. Not only because of the comments above, but also because FR is a witness. A testimony. This is not the same as saying that sounds are factual (or dialectical), because an aesthetic experience is also a political act. Being political should not be confused with making a statement, because actually recording sound is an act of introspection and in my perspective, a field recordist should be invisible and inaudible, with the sound/other being the subject. Being political is being aware that everything is an implied choice.

Acknowledgement

This publication is the outcome of the project *Field Recordings: Politics of Sonic Data*, which was supported by the the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports — Institutional Support for Long-Term Development of Research Organisations — Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 2021.

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⁶³ M.B. Quintero, “Loudness, Excess, Power: A Political Liminality of a Global City of the South,” [in:] *Remapping Sound Studies*, eds. G. Steingo, J. Sykes, Durham 2019, p. 144.

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