

Collateral Damage: Salomé Voegelin

May 2014



A new generation of field recordists is challenging the myth of the invisible figure with a microphone in work that celebrates presence rather than absence.

In the first half of the 20th century, field recordists such as Ludwig Koch and Albert Brand worked as explorers and collectors – sonic butterfly catchers, capturing sound for categorisation, naming and pinning it down in collections and archives. This is an example of field recording contributing to empirical and scientific knowledge about the world, whose comprehension is improved through better bit rates and higher sound quality to capture an authentic sound. This field recording relies on labels and descriptions, conventions from the archive and its pedagogical objectives, to make up for whatever information is lacking from the object caught in sound. It is also entirely transparent to itself, lacking an understanding of the anthropological intrigue of the recordist rather than the recorded.

This age of innocence, now abandoned or ironised by photography, is hard to shift in the invisible realm of phonography. The difficulty partly arises from the recordists' trust in their own multisensory memory of the field. They mistake the reduced sonic data for the sensorial complexity of the contingent encounter, and forget the frame of reference left behind that needs reframing if it is to trigger anything. A field recording made using the method of 'anything goes, just stick your mic in the mud' misses this tension of transformation. Without its impetus, listeners stare in puzzlement at sleevenotes and press releases trying to intellectually grasp the significance and joy of what is absent.

Some field recording is thus incredibly boring and irrelevant for all but the recordist: the exotica of the source replacing the idiosyncrasy of the material



Current Issue 399

May 2017

In Writing

field but its absence, and produce at best a cerebral exchange with what could have remained a private journey. By all means record your soundwalks, stick your mic wherever you want to and produce a butterfly museum of your everyday – just don't expect it to be listened to.

Exciting field recording does not record the field but produces a plurality of fields. It neither abandons the reality of the recorded, nor does it take it for granted, but works with it, responds to it, understands it as one imprint in the landscape made by the body of the recordist and retraced tentatively by the listener. This listener in turn generates a new imprint between the heard and the recorded, listening to the authenticity of a particular rendition rather than its source, and embracing interpretation as part of the actuality of the real. That is at least what I consider to be exciting.

The developing use of field recording in more musical and artistic works, and the inclusion of soundscape compositions on art music imprints such as Touch as well as the foundation of labels dedicated to field recording such as Gruenrekorder, produce a different expectation and demand a different consideration of what recording the field means and who its recordists and who its listeners are, and where it is that their respective listening meets, or not.

Some works on both these labels produce the plurality of the field that is exciting to me, and seem sensitive to the pitfalls of the humanist and Romantic endeavour of capturing nature, urban and rural. Others produce music and art from the material harvested in the field. And there is a difference. While the latter connects back to musical tropes pursued, for example, by Olivier Messiaen and Charles Ives, whose inspiration and resource is the acoustic environment, technologically or notationally recorded, but whose aspiration is music, the former produces a new lineage that starts not in the field but with the body, and whose aim is not necessarily music but sound and listening.

These are the compositional practices of field recording whose instrumental, electroacoustic and digital treatment of the material are determined neither by the expectations of musical conventions, nor by those of art. Instead, the works of Cathy Lane, Signe Liden and Francisco Lopez, among others, sound the possibility of the real through interpretations of the actual, and prompt a listening to sound rather than to music and art. Lane produces a field from archive footage and life recordings digitally processed, Liden displaces the field through installation, and Lopez blindfolds the listener to achieve a different audition. They all produce sonic versions of Ana Mendieta's imprints: the moulding of one's own body into the landscape, to leave the trace of an inhabited possibility, rather than produce the reportage of an assumed actuality. Mark Peter Wright's recordings are quite literally such imprints: photographs, words and sound - showing us not so much the field as his position within it and reminding us of our own.

All of these recordists seem acutely aware of themselves, their self-consciousness generating the field. This is in stark contrast to the assumed self-evidence of those recordists who understand themselves naturally absent in the presence of recording technology. Indebted still to their historical roots, they believe in their own transparency and in the reality of the field, and pursue the

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Adventures In Sound And Music
hosted by Daisy Hyde

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The Wire's weekly show on Resonance FM, this time featuring music by Parris, Helena Hauff, Mika Vainio, Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe and more. The show took place on 13 April

the field, is in part generational, but it also holds truths about gender, ethnicity and socio-economic identity. It touches on the comfort and self-assurance of the recordist in the world of the everyday, of music and of art, and how they see themselves mirrored or alienated by what we consider its actuality: musically and aesthetically as well as economically, socially and politically.

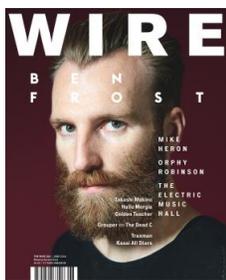
The work of Ximena Alarcon and Claudia Wegener, for example, have turned field recording into a practice of social and cultural interaction, and Felicity Ford as well as Antye Greie use it to invite participation and foster exchange. And while Patrick Farmer morphs the field into performance and compositional processes, producing scores and books that do not necessarily lead to music but to an expanded field, Davide Tidoni listens to the boundaries of urban spaces by popping balloons.

These developments are no doubt facilitated by cheaper recording technology and the connective infrastructure of the internet, but they also reveal a different attitude towards knowledge and reality, and how we inhabit the world. They mark out a post-humanist sensibility where we do not seek to own the sounds of this world, to know and to have them, but understand ourselves to be part of its soundscape, not at its centre but simultaneous with it, sounding with and through it a reality that is plural and passing.

Maybe we should stop recording altogether and simply listen. But I believe the future of field recording lies in the tension created by transforming the heard through participation, collaboration, expansion and play, through which we can try a humbler humanity of shared spaces, and renegotiate what is real.

Salome Voegelin co-convenes, with Mark Peter Wright, Points of Listening (PoL), a monthly programme of listening workshops, activities and discussions based in and around London.

By Salomé Voegelin



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June 2014

Comments

'...the body inhabiting the field...' Absolutely. Body - mind, heart and soul as well. My own approach places the individual at the epicenter of inhabiting the

In Writing

actually changes the environment - transiently, sometimes permanently, but sensitively. It is transformational, we are changed. It is vital that we learn to engage with the locations we inhabit both to understand them and for those locations to inform us. This is the foundation of conservation. Inhabiting dynamically with conscience, responsibility, reverence, love resulting in an essential outcome - an ongoing personal and collective maturity transforming our relationship with our planet.

The recordings I make are merely a record of those moments of personal environmental coalescence, at a particular place and time, a record that can also form the basis of other compositions.

Dallas Simpson 16|05|2014

we just always need to remember, especially with articles coming via academia, that the 'history' or impression of field recording discussed is a personal view based on a limited experience (we all have limited experience to various degrees & to me this is one of the reasons 'field recording' does not fit into academic systems of established hierarchy and influence - it is vastly more interesting & creative than that). Several of the folks mentioned are seen by lots of folks as creating 'boring' work also & certainly more than one or two seem to create work that is devoid of any personal presence other than in an obvious way - no disrespect to them. I think partly the issue is that for some the perception of what 'field recording' has been in the past has just been 'nature recording' & this false history is problematic. For example it has been used as a performance device for decades - probably since the 1920's at least & therefore, for example, there is nothing even remotely new or modern about how certain artists use field recording in performance. What is more interesting is to think about (as Salome also touches upon perhaps) why, for example, Signe (whose work I like a lot) whilst using techniques that have been well explored by others for a very long time, creates work that is uniquely hers. There is only one Signe (in terms of her work) - I can't say the same for some of the other recordists work, which includes at least 2 artists whose work I personally think is at the absolute opposite of what the writer hears in it - which is part of why field recording has a wider offer to listeners than can be contained in formal, outmoded ways of assessing & critiquing it. It is always subjective & I do think this needs to be more explicit in texts, as academia begins to increasingly see field recording, as an art form, that can be quantified in certain ways. Having said all that I should point out that I respect Salome & I certainly think a good conversation is to be had around all of these subjects - but it is & always will be a conversation, not an attempt to decide anything about the past, the present or where field recording is going.

JrF 22|05|2014

Does field recording really need to 'catch up' with visual arts practices and be promoted in similar ways? Why not explore its different capacities? As the article suggests - through citing Mendieta's 1970's works - it seems late in the day to require a focus on the field recordist's own body as proof of a contemporary consciousness. The 'naive' absence of the field recordist can be recast as a move

In Writing

oreadom - might also be considered as appropriate to many field recordings as absolute, classical receptions. And rather than pulling exclusive 'new lineages' from out of a mass of works, field recording practices more generally might be thought of in 'minor' terms: where many individuals produce works in a collective way.

Ruth Hawkins 09|07|2014

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