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Presentness in Displaced Sound

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Leonardo Music Journal, Volume 23, 2013, pp. 13-14 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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PRESENTNESS IN DISPLACED SOUND

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ABSTRACT

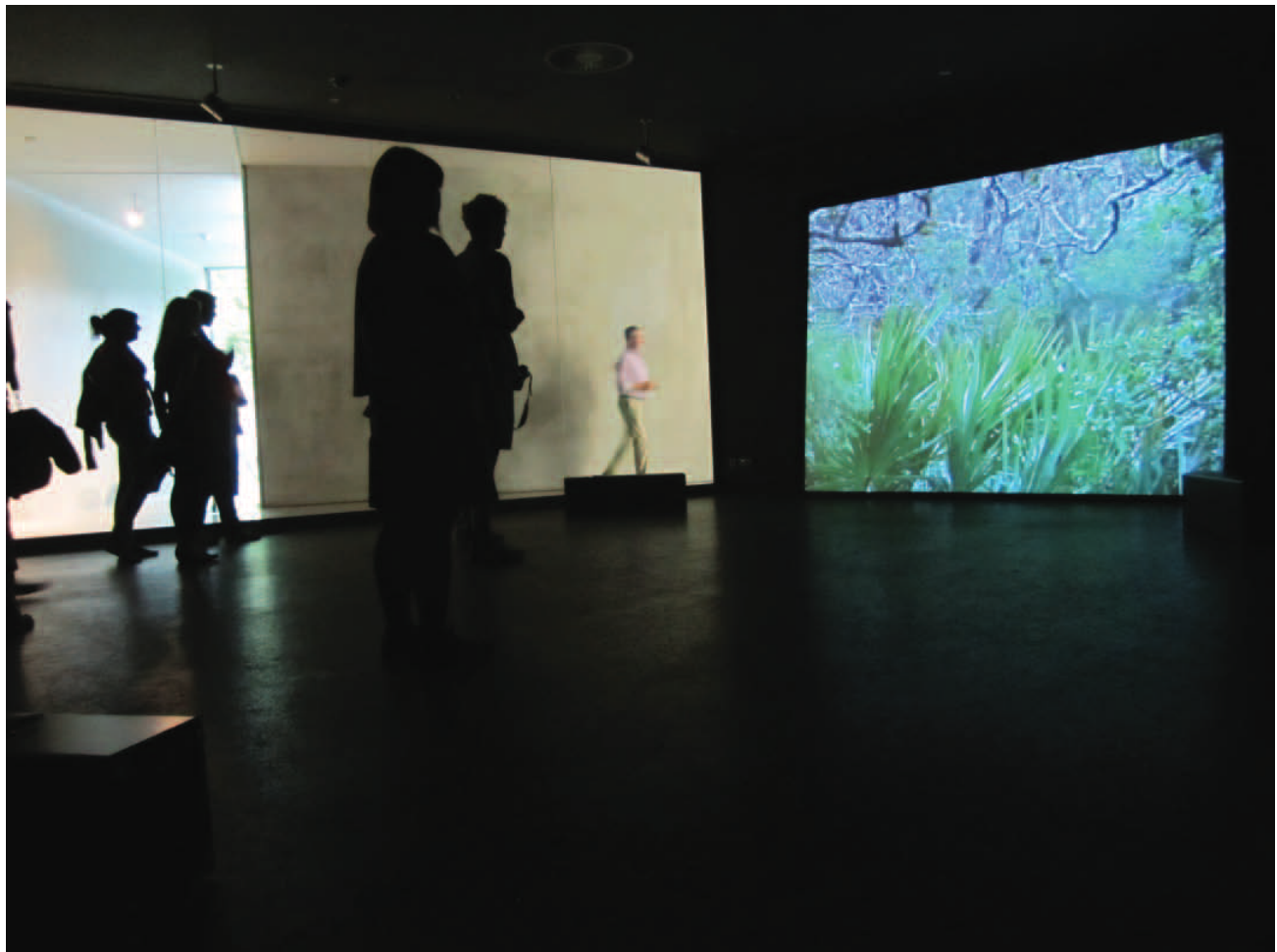
The author discusses her works that explore sound's influence on creating a sense of presentness and her aim to increase the audience's awareness of this influence.

The deceptively simple process of recording sounds from a chosen environment and replaying them at another time and place is laden with assumptions about context and portability. Whether considered documentation, preservation or musical material, this practice, usually referred to as "field recording," provokes important questions about establishing relationship to place through listening. The theory and practice from the 1970s to today of sound artists and acoustic ecologists, such as Schafer, Westerkamp, Lockwood, Oliveros, Dunn and LaBelle, echoed in visual art (e.g. Robert Smithson's concept of "Site/Nonsite") provide a rich variety of approaches to this topic. Although field recordings make sounds available to a distant public, any de-contextualization of a

soundscape from its environment forces us to listen as outsiders, inevitably biasing our understanding. This can lead to a pseudo-understanding of a distant location, which, at its worst, I call "sonic colonialism." When listening to field recordings, we need to consider our relationship to the recorded sounds: the context in which they originate, the place in which we hear them and how our experience is mediated by technology. This also applies to environments that we cannot physically access, such as underwater, inside the body or other extremes of physical and temporal scales.

If sound is a form of energy, generated and embedded in place and describing acoustic relationships occurring within a specific location, then a recording is like a sonic ghost of place. How can a sense of presentness—an acute awareness of embodied location—be achieved in such displaced soundscapes? In my work, I consider the listener as the spatio-temporal locus of a perceptual event, emphasizing how techniques of listening can potentially

Fig. 1. Yolande Harris, *Tropical Storm*, sound and video installation, 2009/2012. Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Leipzig, 2012. (Photo © Yolande Harris)



invigorate the use of field recording in sound art. The following three works approach displaced sound through different means: a visual arts exhibition, an Internet sound exhibition and a sound walk workshop, demonstrating various strategies for exploring these ideas.

Tropical Storm (2009) (Fig. 1) poses these questions of displaced sound through the tradition of an immersive playback space [1]. Sound and video recordings of a tropical storm evoke the multisensory experience of being immersed in a torrential rainforest downpour. The installation presents the intensity of noise and energy through minimal editing, allowing the exact synchronization of sound and image to work up an affective space of palpable intensity that can be both overwhelming and meditative. Rather than presenting this in a completely darkened space, I carefully consider the actual exhibition space when installing the work, encouraging visitors to be fully aware of their surroundings and thus question the displaced nature of the field recording.

You Me Swim Blackbird (2012) addresses the listener's awareness of bodies in place and the everyday technology used to retrieve and present personal sounds [2]. Exploring bodily rhythms through sound, the work presents interlocking pulses of a mother and her unborn baby's heartbeats, sounds of breathing while swimming and a blackbird's springtime call: the sound of a body inside a body, a body crossing from water to air and a body calling through air. The sounds were recorded using consumer technology: a handheld prenatal ultrasound device, a small waterproof camera and a laptop computer's built-in microphone. Each captures a different sonic quality that makes the intensity of the sounds more palpable, more internal or more open. Furthermore, this short stereo work was composed for the unpredictable, distributed listening environments of the exhibition website.

In *Displaced Sound Walks* (2010/2012), workshop participants use binaural microphones and handheld recorders to record sounds on a short walk of their choosing [3]. On their return, they listen to these recordings inside the workshop space. Next, each participant listens to the recording on headphones while retracing the exact walk, overlaying the same space with sound displaced in time. The final stage is to experience other participants'

recordings and routes. The shift in temporal relationship between the location seen and the sounds heard provokes a perceptual awareness of our reliance on sound, its influence on the visual and on our sense of place. Participants in the workshop walks learn to use simple sound recording technology in a precise way to create a heightened awareness of sensory perception and to enhance their sense of presentness in the immediate environment.

References and Notes

1. Exhibited at "Cage 100: Opening Spaces for Action," Museum of Contemporary Art, Leipzig, 2012.
2. Commissioned for exhibition Soundworks, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 2012; <www.ica.org.uk/projects/soundworks>.
3. Most recently exhibited at Cage 100 [1].

Manuscript received 2 January 2013.

Yolande Harris is a composer and artist engaged with sound and image in environment and architectural space. Her most recent artistic research projects, Sun Run Sun: On Sonic Navigations (2008–2009) and Score-scapes (2009–2011), explore sound, its image and its role in relating humans and their technologies to the environment.

MOBILE SOUND AND LOCATIVE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses her work in relation to site-specific practice, embodied interaction and the practice of walking.

My practice investigates spatial and social conditions within urban environments through interactive artworks situated at the intersection of sound, performance and mobile technologies. Drawing from everyday experience and influences such as body art, locative media, phenomenology and human-computer interaction, my artworks use sound to create reciprocal dialogues between body, artwork and site through exploratory gesture, embodied interaction, improvised choreography and play.

My approach to both sound and media is greatly informed by my experience of walking in urban environments, which I consider a form of personal and spatial encoding. I began working with sound and technology simultaneously out of a desire to articulate the immediacy of walking while carving out a sense of place within the acoustic ecology of the city. Over the past decade, I have navigated these spaces through a gradual progression from headphone-based artworks to interactive pieces that merge the affordances of objects with the expressive potential of the body [1].

I am interested in the ways that sound can shift the parameters of spatial practice from the body's position within physical space to the liminal space articulated by the moving body. Writers such as Miwon Kwon and James Meyer conceive of "site" as a set of parameters that complicate notions of place by including social, institutional or cultural conditions that operate beyond a work's physical location. For example, in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Miwon Kwon argues that "place" now operates "more like an itinerary than a map . . . it can be literal, like a street corner, or virtual, like a theoretical concept" [2]. In *The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site-Specificity*, James Meyer defines this space as a "functional site" that sits opposite the geographically specific "literal site." According to Meyer, "The functional site may or may not incorporate a physical place. . . . Instead, it is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them. . . . It is a temporary thing, a movement, a chain of meanings and imbricated histories: a place marked and swiftly abandoned" [3].

Because functional sites do not "privilege" place, the moving body takes on new significance and authority. While geography is implied by the body's position at any given moment, that position is always changing—the body is the only constant. In my artworks such as *walking machine* (2003) and *Freestyle SoundKit* (2006), movement through space places users between territories, positioning the body of the user as the primary site of reception. Unlike locative artworks that engage by facilitating the peripatetic exploration of specific locations, these pieces may be performed almost anywhere.

Other works investigate the ways that sound can integrate the affor-