

The Third Soundscape

Interview conducted with John Grzinich by Leandro Pisano for the article:

"The Third Soundscape: Carl Michael von Hausswolff/Thomas Nordanstand, John Grzinich/Maksims Shentelevs, Enrico Ruggeri/Elio Rosolino Cassarà"

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LP One of your interests is to explore “spaces and places in the Baltic’s that have fallen into the folds of history”. What is the most fascinating element in this kind of approach and how important is the use of sound in order to unveil voids, gaps in leftover spaces?

JG In a way, I think the importance of using sound to uncover or reveal certain aspects of places that have fallen into the “cracks of history”, is more of a personal artistic interest than a practical one. My use of sound is something of a byproduct of the exploration, possibly how photography has become used in combination with 'urban exploration' in being a creative document of some kind. When we talk of spaces of abandonment we're really describing places that were once full of activity but have ended up “lifeless”. Unless these places have been fully taken over by nature or are located in an urban area, they can be very quiet or nearly silent. Making some type of intervention using sound is a way to reintroduce “life” back into a place even if it's only momentary. Equating sound with life emphasizes our temporal existence, especially when we think about the contexts in which we live and the sounds we hear on a daily basis.

LP You have recently written a post on “Sounds of Europe” blog, mentioning some stories from abandoned places in Latvia narrated by Maksims Shentelevs. Did you have directly experience similar places in Estonia or other interesting areas in the world? If yes, what were your impressions about landscape/architectures and which are the most important results you've got from this exploration process?

JG I've worked a good deal in the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries, which share a common heritage of industrial and military infrastructure, of which there is still a surplus of places to explore. This includes many places in both urban and rural locations. For example, Soviet agriculture functioned on an industrial scale and one can find a variety of buildings and complexes of decaying concrete structures distributed throughout most rural villages in the Baltic's. The same goes for military structures which were often hidden in remote forest locations and may contain an assortment of bunkers, tunnels, hangars etc, all of which have their own debris and acoustic character. With such abandoned structures left for nature to return, they slowly blend into the landscape and become more integrated every day. The results can be seen and heard in my film “Sound Aspects of Material Elements” which documented many site-specific investigations from 2006 to 2010 and on several site-specific recordings and other composed sound works. With Maksims Shentelevs, we've conducted several workshops based on the exploration of abandoned spaces, as in the “Riga Sound Locations” workshop in 2007. Interestingly, a number of other workshops I've conducted that involved site-specific investigations, also resulted in the use of transitory or abandoned spaces. It seems that people feel more

free to explore and express themselves in places that are undefined in purpose or carry a kind of residual memory of what once existed.

LP Exploring marginalized areas and abandoned places through sound can lead us to a reflection on a controversial aspect: sound is marginalized in a world where visual culture predominates as much as abandoned places are left behind for their innate functional uselessness. Generally, what is your opinion on this topic?

JG The use of ruins and abandoned places has become part of mainstream aesthetics. You can see this in many films, music videos and commercials, and the obsession with post-apocalyptic scenarios, but you're correct in this being accepted through our visually dominant culture. One could call it a paradox of the senses. As I already explained, the silence that one can hear in many abandoned places reflects the lack of life and even death of cultures that once existed from ancient ruins to industrial heritage. This can be disturbing or unsettling for some people, making our sense of hearing more difficult to deal with (and hence abuse). But the imbalance of visual and auditory culture applies to a much wider set of scenarios. Take for example the strict visual guidelines of national parks that still allow unlimited air traffic or historic town centers that don't restrict trashy commercial radio to be played into public spaces.

LP How is geography important in your work with sound?

JG The connections between sound and geography is something I'm working to develop more. As geography is the means by which we describe our world it is only natural to expand the vocabulary include sound, especially since sound is an inherent component in our perception of time and space. In recent years have I noticed geographers (and for that matter researchers from other disciplines such as anthropology, architecture, biology etc) taking more of a serious interest in sound, but I can't help but feel it's because the recording tools are more available and easier to use rather finding the need to understand the perceptual/social/cultural issues regarding sound (which have always been there). The semantic approach to sound still has great potential as far as understanding what sounds and the acoustic character of spaces and places mean to us. This is complicated by the two sided nature of our relationship to sound as both passive listeners and active noise makers, which are inherently connected in a continual reflexive process. While the active part is often overlooked, the passive part (at least for me) has been mystified and even turned into a religion of sorts (in the quest for purity and silence), yet both aspects have geographic dimensions that offer challenges to describe. I've adopted the term "audible geography" as a working frame to help define this descriptive process (actually before I knew about the CD compilation with the same title).

LP And how can sound be important in order to analyze the geography of boundaries, in a world where the global hybridization process is creating a lack of sense of boundary in our perception of territory?

JG If anything I feel we have far too many boundaries in our perception of territory (as we are highly territorial beings). Yet, this is a good point and is an area where we as practitioners need to be very critical in our actions. As the world becomes more globalized we also hear more and more homogenization of our sound environments especially in urban areas with traffic noise and what I would call the monotony of mass media drowning out more unique and localized audible characteristics. One of the

emerging tendencies with the expanding use of field recording to explore sound environments and capture the audible aspects of place, is to also “map” places and cultures through sound. This is evident in the proliferation of online “sound maps”. One of these I contribute to, [Radio Aporee Maps](#) by Udo Noll, is currently approaching 20,000 recordings from 15,000 different places. That's a sonic geography unlike anything we've known before and it's an accessible and open platform for people to contribute. Whether or not this has scientific merit is hard to say but I don't think that's the point. There are a variety of uses for such maps. As I noted before, the subjective nature of how we listen to the world means we need to expand our efforts to share what we hear, making these kind of maps useful tools.

LP In a recent interview, you have said “I like recordings with a deep spatial “image” and if that happens to include a diverse array of sounds, familiar or not, natural or mechanical, it doesn’t really matter”. How do visual aspects affect your work when you are exploring a place through sound?

JG I put the word “image” in quotes to emphasize how we commonly use visual metaphors to describe the listening experience. We should all be familiar with the term 'stereo image' which refers to location or placement of sounds within the stereo field, but in a more technical manner. What I really wanted to describe was the elaborate sense of spatial perception we can achieve through attentive listening, from placement and movement of sources within the binaural field to fairly accurate distances of the sources. On the other hand the complete obscurification of sound sources induces an entirely different effect as with drones. These contrasts in qualities of space allow the attention to sink into and drift through a recording or composition. The play of spatial imagery is something that is utilized more in field recording based works, be they straight or processed, as opposed to studio productions that treat space as a highly controlled element within sound recording (with acoustic effects being added later).

LP During my listening experience of “Madal ÖÖ (Shallow Night)” album, I was really impressed by your method of exploring places and objects through a very carefully recording approach. What does it mean for you relating with tiny (sometimes invisible) sounds of things and places?

JG As I've said before in regards to my use of field recording, the biggest challenge is to discover what exists in the area where you live. I enjoy using it to document places and events when I travel but there is a tendency for some to use field recording as a pretense for exoticism, giving the impression that good recordings can only be made in the arctic or the depths of the amazon. The recordings on '[Madal ÖÖ](#)' came out of an interest to explore and learn about the natural sonic environments in the surroundings where I live, particularly in the springtime when the wildlife comes into full swing after the long dormant winter. Much of this natural cycle is not so much invisible as it is transitory, existing only for a matter of hours or days.

LP What difference do you make among critical listening, subjective listening and "imagined" listening?

JG I'm not sure what you mean by “imagined” listening, but I'd say that all listening is subjective. Critical listening comes with experience and is sometimes necessary but should be balanced with knowing how to keep “fresh” ears. Reasoning your way through

a supposedly rational world can dramatically shape the way you hear things and in some cases not allow you to really hear at all. It is important to exercise your ability to hear as you do with your other functions of the body.

LP In an art world, which at times can seem overtly concerned with conceptual and contextual strategies, what is the role of listening pleasure and even beauty?

JG I'm not much of a gallery or museum person especially when it comes to works that involve sound. I can't recall having that many pleasurable listening experiences with conceptually based sound artworks, mostly because they usually don't take into account the acoustics of the space or are unintentionally mixed with other artworks. This is mainly the consequence of trying to fit sound into a visually dominant world without adapting to the needs of the work itself. Although it's not uncommon for me to be surprised by accidents, where audible outcomes happen as an unintended consequence or where the acoustics of a museum enhance the visual experience for example. For example the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna has a great ambience with an old parquet floor that creaks brilliantly as people walk across it and whisper to each other about the masterpieces on the wall. These are exceptions though and it's otherwise much easier for me to find beauty in simply in listening to everyday situations, like going for a walk in the forest.

LP I am particularly interested in connections between sound and memory, in terms of listening experience. What is your opinion on this issue?

JG That's a difficult one. I often ask in my workshops, if anyone has strong memories associated with sounds. There are always a few answers, but the connections are not so clear. If I listen to my recordings I generally have a good image in my mind concerning the context and conditions in which the recording was made. So there is some connection between sound and memory but I think memory functions differently in connection with each of the senses.

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