



8
Metaphors
(because
the moving
image
is not
a book)

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LUKE FOWLER WITH
ÉRIC LA CASA, LEE PATTERSON
AND TOSHIYA TSUNODA

R E F L E C T I O N S O N
A G R A M M A R

TRANSITIONAL WORDS

Luke Fowler

In his article on the 'acousmatic', Pierre Schaeffer introduces a major philosophical premise of *musique concrète*. The concept of the acousmatic, a term Schaeffer gleans from the Larousse dictionary, is invoked through an aphorism: the story of Pythagoras lecturing to his disciples over a five year period, hidden from view, with his voice projecting from behind a curtain. Thus, the acousmatic is a sound event or phenomena stripped of external (and visual) reference. The apparent zeal with which Schaeffer appropriated this term for his own rhetoric cannot be fully understood without first appreciating the conditions that gave rise to the birth of this radical new music. Indeed *musique concrète* was perhaps the first musical form that fully disposed with the cult of celebrity. It eschewed the holy trinity of conductor, performer and musical instrument, and replaced these roles with the tools of the microphone and tape recorder, and the resultant sound disseminated either through the then-emerging technology of radio, or via concerts featuring multiple loudspeaker diffusions.

I'm prepared to assert, speaking from a Scottish perspective, that the radicality of this act has yet to be fully rehearsed. What I and many other artists are attracted to in *musique concrète* is Schaeffer's idea of 'reduced listening', a term that encourages the listener to focus on the phenomenal characteristics of sound (as opposed to its musical or cultural significations), a focus that results in a richer experience of music and its constituent parts (sonorous objects). Schaeffer also emphasises the need to describe and analyse the collective 'subjectivity' of sound objects, which leads one to a deeper, universal understanding of the nature of sound.

It is not without due caution, then, that I set about making a cycle of films which took the complex act of field recording as a starting point. Upon establishing my collaborators for these films — Lee Patterson, Éric La Casa and Toshiya Tsunoda (an incomplete *Part 4* was also shot with Sean Meehan) — I put forward a number central questions: to what degree could Schaeffer's 'reduced listening' (a concept that seems to be one of the central tenets of field recording) be achieved when 'accompanied' by the moving image; would the moving image become superfluous, a mere visual banality, or could it give sound more depth; could there then be a 'reduced viewing', a viewing which renounces the usual secondary status of sound in film, in order to establish equal footing with that of the image; is there an underlying political and social

reality repressed by the field recorder in the act of gathering their exotic sound souvenirs; can the union between sound and image cast a light on the fraught ecology of our present condition? Such enquiries hint at the complex realities underneath the surface of Schaeffer's 'pure listening'.

In 'The Despotism of The Eye', Irish Poet and critic Tom Paulin recounts an early childhood memory of listening to a haunting whistling sound while lying awake in bed and being mesmerised by the beauty of the 'acousmatic' experience. As an adult, he later discovers the origin of this sound phenomenon to be the wind blowing through the metal fence posts in Ormeau Park, Ireland. He comments that sounds can have all sorts of ontological meanings, adding, "it is to do with our dwelling in the world, our being. It is to do with, as it were, our ontology of relationship, which we have with the entire universe".

CROSS-COLLABORATIONS

Lee Patterson

If memory serves me correctly, *A Grammar For Listening* began life as a slightly different entity. After working together on his film *Bogman Palmjaguar* during the summer of 2007, Luke suggested a new project based around my work and approach to field recording. With this in mind, later that same summer I asked Luke if he could assist me during a separate project in Argyll.

Barry Esson of Arika had selected both Toshiya Tsunoda and myself to create environmentally sited works for an outdoor event. During the research and installation phases we needed a driver to take us to various locations. I suggested to Luke that if he could drive it could be an ideal opportunity for him to gather material and to meet Toshiya.

Throughout 2008, we collaborated on other projects, including the series of films/performances *Draw a straight line and follow it*. Luke also initiated his ongoing collaboration with Toshiya. Additionally, there were discussions about *Ontology of Sound*, as the project was then called. Luke had formulated certain ideas as to what the project should set out to achieve and how it might then progress. It became clear that it would not focus on my work alone, which admittedly was something of a relief.

Given our mutual understanding of each other's approaches (and sometimes

The microphone can be positioned anywhere near the ears, but I think the temples are the best place for making a sound recording. There is no relation between the temples, an air microphone and brain waves; our brain waves do not stir the air.

In some ways, this method could be described as a field recording. Abstract issues other than field recordings are also involved here, of course, such as my intentionality and its object. But at the very least, one can call this recording 'evidence' of my focusing in on an object at a certain place and time.

I recently used a second stethoscope on another person's temples. The two of us sat side by side, recording, focusing on the landscape. Together, we created a stereo 'sound image'. A landscape becomes a more distinct object with the perceptions of two people rather than one — a 'fuller' recording can emerge from such a scenario. The main issue here is our grasp of the image: capturing a single image with two inputs — something that our eyes and ears normally perform.

With the 'space information' — sent from two persons' ears to our brains — neither of us can distinguish our individually perceived sounds. This stereo sound image is created between and through both people. If two people face the same landscape each may have different experiences. But in this activity, there is no doubt that those two people shared the same landscape. Their experiences are set inside the recording.

THE MAP AND THE GROUND

Éric La Casa

When exploring territories as vast and dense as Paris or Glasgow, a topographic map allows for all layers and their realities to be smoothed out into a single drawing, as precise in its measurements as it is schematic. This is why two-dimensional representation is often the first tool used to make contact with a terrain. With a single glance, we seize the geography of a country and extrapolate its possibilities.

The sketch is a trigger to our mental construction of the spaces through which we begin to make our way, and onto which we bring our attention to bear. This reflexive examination of the map — be it a strict adherence to scientific data, or else a surrendering of oneself to non-geographic interpretations — directs the mind towards a series of hypotheses that simulate one's arrival on the ground,

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sometimes determining the very nature of the in-situ project (when, for example, one encounters terrains that have remarkable features).

The map's ordered vision releases one from the complexities of reality and establishes a clear scope for observation; it provides a vantage point from which interdisciplinary dialogue is possible. Thus, an abandoned military area, a valley downstream of a dam, a business district built on a concrete slab or an old towpath become spaces where one sees the promise of a unique encounter or, more simply put, of interesting encounters, whether sonic, visual, or other. Once there, the map's promises are surveyed not by methodology but by the body, as one drifts along unpremeditated trajectories. Without method or compass one wanders like an animal, senses awakened, before arriving at an exact position where microphones and/or cameras can validate and record a particular space/time. This 'particularity' is linked to strategies of movement (one's relation to the landscape's constants, for instance), climatic fluctuations (and their attendant consequences) and everything that resists understanding; our alerted senses attempt to grasp such things.

The result is an accumulation of recordings; an environment is put to the test, networks and relationships operate according to various rules. It is a location-based composition that takes into account measurements from one site only, rather than simultaneous mixes of elements from different sites. Together, the recordings form a representation of the world, a precise environment whose aesthetic expression nestles close to cartography.

THE GROUND

Casa

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INTERVIEWS WITH CHRISTOPH COX

ÉRIC LA CASA

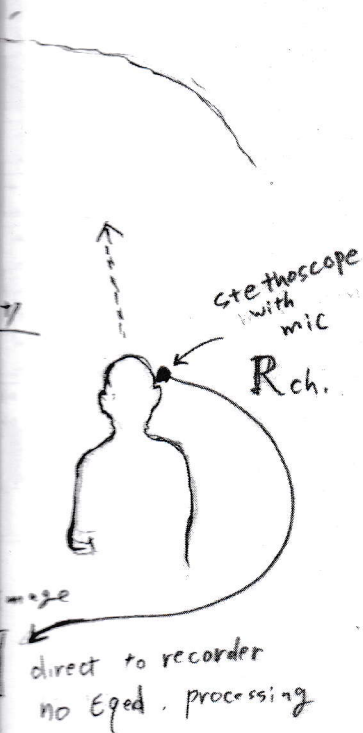
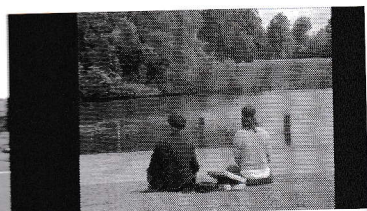
CHRISTOPH COX: To what degree are you trying to document particular sounds in relation or in contrast to trying to produce an art object? Are these tendencies distinct in your work?

ÉRIC LA CASA: A project is always given a specific response. From the original idea, the process to be employed is tested and, as a result, it is validated (or not) in situ. Using methods derived from the humanities, the concept is tested in the field in order to bring about questions that couldn't and shouldn't be predetermined. That is why I increasingly find myself employing work protocols (a more scientific method) in order to examine the project with the hope this methodology will allow all possible 'lessons' to be drawn. The working protocol can be deduced from the terrain but may sometimes be linked to a driving principle only. For example, the fact that Luke uses a 16mm camera with only a short length of film stock — about 3 minutes and 30 seconds, if I remember correctly — instructs the whole process. Each parameter is a calculation that determines the future form of the work.

Your question implies another, which concerns my relationship with the question of artistic taste. This is key in the discussion of methodology. How do my personal tastes — including all possible internal conflicts — impact on my work during all the stages of the process? To what extent is my work protocol protected from my preconceived approach to the terrain, to the way I hear it?

CC: When you record, what do you listening for? What sounds attract you?

ÉLC: I don't have a system (of listening) that can be employed for all sites. My ways of listening are adapted to each project and to the different questions posed. If I'm taken particularly by the (acoustic) qualities of a space. I don't impose preconceived ideas on what I ought to encounter in that space. The map serves as a medium for hypotheses and opens up



perspectives that, once surveyed, will define a form. In any case, I always try to put myself in the service of the project.

With Luke, our principal idea was to work on everyday environments. We weren't looking for the extraordinary — this is a feature in our respective work. The key was to be able to go in one direction and be free to interact according to our own rules (technical, temporal etc.). Each of us led or influenced the other in terms of possible sites and reactions. In Paris, I chose exclusively car-free spaces in order to preserve the location's acoustic properties (among others): the Seine under Pont Alexandre III, around the Grande Arche at La Défense, the Parc Floral and its greenhouses, a bike path along the Ourcq Canal. All of these places allowed us to deploy our different devices and to individually record that which seems specific to that site. To speak only of sound: the grinding of barge ropes and the distant murmur of the city, the alternation of near-nothings and crashing trains, under the various railway bridges, footsteps reverberating in the underground corridors of the Grande Arche — none of this was pre-meditated. The aesthetic project alone gave birth to the desire to record these specific locations. I made choices based on the map and on my own knowledge of the area, sites whose heterophony might wrong-foot our preconceptions and our inventions, thematic inventions included. Based on this overflow of sounds, we had to invent another way of reading the landscape and of deducing a form.

CC: What, for you, is the specificity of audio or sound? Can sound capture something that, for example, film can't?

ÉLC: It always seems to me a little misleading to speak of the specificity of a medium if one works only in that medium. I can't make comparisons, given that I only use sound. It's a question of attention or of listening, if you prefer. I don't think I'm more sensitive or receptive to sound; but because I work mainly with my ears I can say this sense is perhaps a little more developed, a little more educated. When a film works well, we don't ask whether the visuals take precedence over sound, we enter the film's world without making the distinction. Whatever medium I use to survey a landscape, I develop an attention measured by my instrument's capabilities and by what is opened up to me by my consciousness. I mention perception because my work resides first and foremost in this sensory approach. Be it

a camera, a microphone, my fingers or my nose, I choose a tool that allows me access to a phenomenological territory. Decisions made within the framework of a work protocol, and the levels of perception / consciousness, are the project's true motors. In other words, I invent paths that lead to destinations unknown at the time of their invention.

LEE PATTERSON

CHRISTOPH COX: You've described your work as "eavesdropping upon events that are both alien yet utterly quotidian". This nicely captures two different tendencies in your work. On the one hand, you proceed in an almost documentary fashion, meticulously recording the sounds of objects around you and presenting them virtually untreated. On the other hand, you use these sounds as a way to transport the listener out of the mundane world, to make it strange or to open up alien, exotic dimensions. Are these two tendencies naturally conjoined for you, or is there some tension between them?

LEE PATTERSON: They're usually different aspects of the same activity and owe their existence to this common origin. However, tension may arise in the way they naturally push and pull against each other. Sounds and objects which have unexpected qualities and complexities are of most interest to me, where the dynamic between the expected and the exotic or, more correctly, the unfamiliar is greatest. With experience, I've come to expect the presence of certain sounds within particular things, so this has led to a normalisation whereby the alien and the familiar co-exist in different ways.

My aim isn't so much to transport a listener out of the mundane world but allow them to go further into it, to demonstrate just how strange and unfamiliar it can be upon closer inspection, and to make it less mundane and more engaging, thus mirroring or sharing some of my own experiences. This may be read as an aesthetic quest into realms previously inaccessible

LUKE FOWLER

CHRISTOPH COX: I'm interested in the relationships between image and sound in *A Grammar for Listening*. The image track gives the soundtrack a concreteness, a focus for the sounds, the sources of which are often hard to place. But your image rarely delivers or matches the sonic sources.

LUKE FOWLER: The impetus behind *A Grammar* was to create a series of works that existed outside of verbal language. One of my intentions was to bring sound and certain 'sound artists' to the fore, a desire that surfaced because of my own involvement with and excitement about currents in field recording and experimental music. The concrete experience of working with Lee Patterson on *Bogman Palmjaguar* (in which his role as composer / sound recordist is equally important as the main protagonists) was a great influence.

I set about making some initial 16mm and video studies, which captured Lee and Toshiya Tsunoda 'documentary' style on recording trips, discussing their work and so on. But I quickly realised that this initial concept was weak and needed reconsideration. I wanted to find a new form for these ideas, to completely erase text as a way into the films, and thus work counter to my previous work that relied heavily upon the voice to provide a narrative (often through interviews and archival material).

This decision — that the image could stand alone — was greatly indebted to discovering the films of Robert Beavers and having the privilege to discuss them, and my own past work, with him. In Beavers' work the spirit of a place, or a series of metaphors and associations, are carefully crafted across a highly rhythmic and formally innovative image and soundtrack. They are really remarkable works that deserve to be far more widely discussed and appreciated.

I was interested in taking this premise of re-instating the image. But, in doing so, I did not want to relegate the role of sound to a second-order function. In 2008, I attended a field recording workshop with sound recordist Chris Watson. It was clear from his work that one needed to respect the difference between working with sound and with image. For a start, they require two very different types of attention and different times of the day to capture a phenomenon. It became increasingly apparent that to fully

respect the role of sound in film, it was necessary for me to create a series of dialogues with artists who devote their lives to sound as an art form.

CC: In what ways did working with sound artists affect your decisions about what to film and how to edit your footage?

LF: This is two-fold. Firstly, as these works were collaborative, all the main decisions — from the concept to location and final edit — were generally agreed upon together. In each pairing, we took turns to host the other in our home city, taking the other to places that each felt would be rewarding for the other. I recall Lee getting very excited about the hydrophone recordings he made in Greenock, while Éric La Casa seemed to get some fantastic results from the winds that picked up and excited the steel barriers at the top of Loch Sloy. I would rarely, as you point out, want to film the sound's source — like, say, those steel barriers — partly because we didn't want to have hard syncs, but also because it seemed quite futile. Sound recording and filming often work with phenomena that are quite distinct: the camera is limited to documenting light across surfaces, while a microphone can record something miles away, transduce vibrations deep within a surface, or record sounds often imperceptible to the senses.

So, although we collaborated, we also trusted one another to find something of equivalent importance, which was difficult at times. But it was also in those times I found I was really struggling to 'see' something, that my interaction with the camera, the place, and the situation would coalesce. The rushes from those moments would completely surpass my expectations.

TOSHIYA TSUNODA

CHRISTOPH COX: Until recently, your work as an audio artist attempted to capture the vibrations of various objects and to map the vibrational contexts of particular spaces. Your new work seems to shift the focus towards the body of the listener — or towards your body as an artist. What