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Onlookers, Always, Everywhere: Thinking Through Sound in the Anthropocene

There is perhaps no better way to describe the urgency of our current climate crisis (though it is more than a “climate” crisis) than when Donna Haraway discusses the current state of things: “the edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not just a thriller” (Haraway 161). In our day and age we have encountered the potential end of all days and ages. These stakes are not the stuff of cinema. If we are to continue along our present course, the Earth faces a damage which we cannot undo and a danger which could mean our extinction. Our modern humanity would know nothing like it.

But if we could change ourselves—the ways we think and approach reality—in order to treat the world better, we might stand a chance, to put it tritely. Once again, in Haraway’s words: “the sky has not fallen, not yet” (Haraway “Anthropocene…”). How do we keep it from falling? How can we think differently so that the sky never threatens to fall again? When the problem of our unsustainable way of living becomes apparent to us as a problem of thought and approach, we can find hope in those who work to move both themselves and others beyond the philosophical framework which ignored the current crisis, ignored the facts of the anthropocene. Their work, whether it is theory, art, or practice, would address the concerns of the anthropocene and hopefully take us past the limitations of its thought.

One of the first passages we read this year was Bruno Latour’s “Agency in the Time of the Anthropocene”. It is a complex piece, the main goal of which is to address the philosophical missteps that led the *anthropos* of the anthropocene to permit the permanent damage the Earth has accrued over a geological era defined by the impact of humankind. According to Latour, the environmental crisis we are currently experiencing can be identified as an issue of agency (Latour 4). We have believed that the Earth and its ecology are entities without agency, pure objects. We discuss “the laws of nature” as if nature is a place free of human influence and, therefore, deprived of subjectivity (14).

Ultimately, Latour calls for a return of subjectivity to the Earth. This action involves an eschewal of the notion of nature as an objective environment, as well as a rejection of the conceptual baggage that such a perspective carries with it. But he also calls for a blurring of the subject-object binary overall. No longer can we abide by “the laws of nature”. We must believe the Earth is both an object and a subject, a living system, and a dynamic agent (15).

Latour shows us great thinkers have, indeed, understood that reality does not abide by the subject-object dichotomy. Tolstoy and Twain are both brought in (8-10), due to the fact that their works evince a conflation between objective and subjective forces, energies, or things. This characteristic is why, Latour claims, the realities *within* the art of these writers display realism of existential and philosophical depth (9). It is not a realism of events which binds us to their art; it is this employment of subjectivity and objectivity in tandem.

The central question of my own critical making project is why a musical composition of sounds would be useful in communicating the ideas Latour argues. I do not see it as a question of why these ideas are necessary for dealing with the anthropocene, as I think Latour makes a great case for that. Rather, once the need for the destruction of the subject-object division has been recognized, the problem becomes how each of us can apprehend the absence of the two categories both theoretically and viscerally. We must agree with the argument, yes, but we also must use the argument to adjust our views and treatments of reality. I see a composition of music or sound as a potential fit for this task. Discursive communication has its limits. It works only within the confines of discourse itself, within the *logos*, as we may call it. We may communicate arguments, and we may agree with arguments; of course that exchange has its use. Yet ideas and concepts do not exist solely in the realm of discourse. And the elements of them which are arguably the most vital to realize may fail in reaching us if discursive communication becomes the only means by which they are delivered.

A work of sound art could orient itself particularly well to this purpose. We often understand sounds as objects or materials, unchangeable and externalized from ourselves. Our popular conception is that the sound of the world seems to confront us, rather than involve us. This approach relegates sound to an allegation of its materiality, and it fails to recognize the possibility that sound is a phenomenon beyond the division of the material and the abstract—the object and the subject. We hear the construction noise outside and think it is an immobile fact, or we hear the wind and believe there is nothing we can do to adjust the way it blows through the trees. How we live in the world currently seems to say that the sounds surrounding us can only be presented to us *as they are*, while we walk through the park or through campus. Sound is usually not seen as subjective or as being derived from subjective energies or forces. It is typically an objective material.

In his paper “Four Objections to the Concept of Soundscape” anthropologist Timothy Ingold critiques scholarship on sound for exactly this viewpoint. A focus on sound’s material nature, according to Ingold, enforces the division between “mind and matter” (Ingold 138). This divide is a philosophical one, and it is the same obstacle whose destruction Latour identifies as a necessity to adjust our living to the anthropocene (Latour 16). Ingold’s suggestion, however, moves beyond Latour’s assertion that this binary thinking is a problem. He goes on to say that sound is more than material or abstract. It is, rather, the precondition for the sensory experience of hearing. To confine it to an objectivity would show a poor comprehension of the fact that sound works not as the object of hearing, but as the phenomenon through which hearing takes place (Ingold 138). From this perspective, we should liken sound to light, which is not so much the thing we see but the phenomenon which opens up the possibility of our seeing it (137). Then the issue of hearing something or of creating a composition which might function as an “auditory space” (137) attends to energies and movements, as opposed to the “physical nature” of sound. Writing a sound composition would be closer to producing a kind of sound climate or weather and less like producing an auditory landscape or soundscape (138).

Audio and recording technologies possess a great amount of potential in putting this conception of sound into practice. Although I don’t believe this paper is the place to start discussing their role as media technologies, I will say that the ability to capture and manipulate sound unlocks a limitless amount of possibilities. The invention of audio recording technology was the first time in history we could record birdsong or wind or perhaps the activity and liveliness of a city street. Arguably, the advent of sound recording caused a reformation of how sound was considered philosophically. Its presumed material relationship to context and place—elements which marked sound as an object—now encountered dissonance. A “purification of sound” had occurred (Samuels et. al 330). Because of it, the idea of sound as an object of the “here and now” ran up against the possibilities of sound recording to displace sound from the “here and now”. Sound recording enabled what composer R. Murray Schafer termed “schizophonia” (331).

Now, with the popularization of digital audio workstations like Ableton Live or Logic or ProTools, for the first time in history we are experiencing a worldwide ability to manipulate, design, batter, bruise, or transform sound. Only a few decades ago, the technique and technology required for what we now see as commonplace was much less accessible and more difficult to understand. Today, thanks to laptops and mobile devices—both as conduits for information and as workstations—more of us know how to control sounds than ever before.

If this new ability equates to schizophonia, it is a more interactive form of schizophonia than previously conceived. Moreover, it is an interactive schizophonia which goes farther than detaching sound from place and context. These “digital audio workstations” negate our traditional conceptions of the sound as object or material and encourage an understanding of sound as a medium.

I imagine the gamut of philosophical implications for these developments has yet to be fully explored. But for my own project, I view the technology which allows me to manipulate sound as paramount to the ideas expressed in the work. First, there’s the initial recording technology. All of the sounds in the piece were recorded with my smartphone. A part of me winces at the low audio quality which tends to plague these devices. Usually it results in the auditory equivalent of a poorly pixelated image—not the most aesthetically pleasing counterpart to have.

I realized, however, that one could find usefulness in the distortion of sounds happening at every moment the file is compressed. It acts as a sort of digital marker, a sign that sound has been altered by entering into the virtual realm. This understanding of recording technologies does not coincide with the modernist views on sound discussed in “Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology”. But the historical work done in that paper was with the intention of situating the “soundscape”, which is recognized by the authors as an object or “public entity” for consideration (Samuels et al 330). We cannot mistake sound itself for the “object” which is represented in sound. I’m in agreement with Ingold on the argument that we must rethink sound as a medium instead of an object. We might present a recording as similar to an image, but this analogy only relates to sound itself with regard to its role as the medium of auditory information. It, like light, is the medium of an image, aural or visual. It is not the image itself.

More importantly, though, the software Ableton Live enables a user to take recorded sound from a smartphone (or any other recording device) and actually *change* it. It even has the potential to render it unrecognizable. Herein lies the technological crux of my critical making project. To deprive a sound not only of its source, but of its initial identity as an object, and then to make it function or to sound in a manner atypical of its character, produces a tense space between subjectivity and objectivity, inside of which one may hear differently. We hear not the reworking of the object’s identity through sound, but transformations of an identity into the motions and energies of sound. This technology allows us to traverse the conceptual limit of sound as an object and move closer to Ingold’s refocusing on the “fluxes of the medium” (138) of sound itself. What we thought of initially as something physically, materially, and objectively tied to sound—the “sound” of a sound—is much more malleable and open to interpretation.

And I do see the changes and effects of software on sound as a kind of interpretation. The sound artist, in this case, derives the new sound from the original sound. Although the new sound will always carry its past forms within itself, the sound artist also chooses what elements of the sound to adjust, to shape, or to design. Such a choice could involve a change in the pitch or frequency of the movements within sound and a retention of their timbres, or it could mean an isolation of a particular moment in the sound which could then be expanded or distorted to taste. There are, of course, many more possibilities. The main point is that sound design or sound art can be viewed as an activity which treats sound as a text, able to be interpreted through more sound in turn.

The hermeneutic potential of this software becomes vital, then, to a work which is attempting to put materials, once thought of as physical or objective, into practice as expressions of forces, energies, or singularities which are neither objective nor subjective, neither mind nor body. What digital audio technology unlocks inside of a sound are the energy and potentials we do not hear in their initial manifestations. They are the same “fluxes of the medium” (138) mentioned in Ingold’s paper. With the case of found sounds, it takes the recordings of objects and of an objective world—detectable through sound—and destabilizes these “objective” qualities through the very medium in which we considered them as such. We are then allowed to observe them, through sound once again, in reworked form through the use of digital audio workstations. Employing them in a different way, we can turn them into surprising visions of their past selves. Their identities as objects, which are still evident but are also much less permanent than previously recognized, become detached and appropriable. This dissociation from objectivity becomes more apparent when we consider the musical potential of the newly formed sonic climate.

Musicality and music are important to this project insofar as they open up possibilities for the subjective expression of sound. We recognize musicality not only in music, but also in any expression we think of as potentially “musical”. However, the potential for music does not mean that anything possessing a musicality can then go and make music, nor does it mean that sounded objects with the potential for musicality are actually musical. Musicality is the potential energy of music, traditionally signifying the presence of humanity, or at the very least the activity of being human. While the category of the “human” relies completely on the subject-object divide, there is value in understanding “humanity” as yet another label for Western subjectivity. It means that we have yet to broach the origins of musicality if we believe it to originate at the human. Also, it means that we recognize musicality as opening up the possibility of subjectivity. It is not just humans that can make music. But we do connect the ability to make music as the ability to express the self, to express subjectivity. We cannot consign this quality solely to music, however. Any form of expression is a potential expression of subjectivity. What is unique to music—and the reason why I engaged with the concept of music and musicality in the first place—is sound itself.

I understand the employment of objects through sound in my project as a kind of musical expression. In other words, I have used sound and the objects within it as an expression of myself and my subjectivity. This statement may seem contradictory to my aims of rethinking the subject-object divide, but I find the entrance of audio technologies into equation complicates this issue. Within the composition, the detached objectivity of objects recorded through sound and by audio technology clashes with the possible subjectivity of music. Objects found within processed sound possess marks of their former physical selves. When they are further realized in music, they carry a sense of expression infused with the motivating energy of the self. This interaction, in my own opinion, produces a kind of formal tension within the work. It is arguably music and arguably not; it is arguably found “sound” and arguably not. Its role as both music and sound are both important, then, in accomplishing the project’s goal of moving beyond the categories and qualities of object and subject.

Still, to approach the critical making project explicitly as a work of art might become restrictive. A “work” is something objective, originating as it may have from a subject. While we may view all the forces, energies, singularities, and intensities a work of art involves as subjective, once the work is finished—whether it is a piece of music or a painting—its presentation to us as a “work of art” consigns it to the role of object. To use a straightforward case: a painting as work of art equates to a painting as object, although the painting comes from the painter—a subject. The entire mind and body of the painter might have been involved in its creation. The painting may express ideas or emotions beyond the subject/object divide. But these factors bear no weight if we point to the object only as a work of art, limiting its possibilities and its functions to whatever boundaries such a label assumes.

There must be a way of thinking about the composition beyond its role as expression of the self, and there must also be a way to think differently of the “objects” I present through sound in refigured, dissonant form. The composition of a “sonic climate”—a notion that would align with Ingold’s—is certainly one I espouse. I would not go so far, though, as to say the composition functions only as a “climate”. A recognition of sound as a medium does not necessarily mean we are confined to meteorological thinking. Once we have moved towards sound as the condition for the possibility of hearing, we can approach how we may compose the changes and movements of a medium into something communicatory.

Kathleen Stewart’s paper “Tactile Composition” has a moment when she discusses the possibilities of re-viewing an object which has been treated only as representation or resource beforehand (Stewart 119). What do we miss when we conceive of the world outside of us only as full of objects or, as Latour shows us, as an object itself? According to Stewart, we miss an understanding of the world as a “thing”, as a configuration of both objectivity and subjectivity. Things, unlike objects, do not define themselves through the binary opposition of mind and matter. Instead, they resist the classification as “object” by being considered a collection of “affects, effects, conditions, sensibilities, and practices” (119). Once these elements of experience compress themselves in both space and time, a thing comes into form.

Here, the emergence of form could be likened to the constant composition and decomposition of Donna Haraway’s sym-chthonic entities. Perhaps it may even address the sym-chthonic thinking Donna Haraway appeals to under her notion of the “Cthulucene” (Haraway “Anthropocene…”). Stewart’s “tactile composition” concerns astute observation towards the processes of a “thing” coming into form, and Haraway’s notion of the “sym-chthonic” involves “myriad temporalities and spatialities” coming into contact with the assemblage of activity which constitutes an entity (Stewart 119; Haraway “Anthropocene…”). Their foci are both on the contact point at which something is always becoming itself. For Haraway, it is the anthropocene, the singularities and energies of which must be identified through a variety of names. Stewart, on the other hand, moves toward a broader recognition of all “things” in general. They both depart from the subject-object framework towards viewpoints which favor multiplicities and energies interacting together to give something form.

We notice a thing through thoughtful engagement with the way this “coming into form” happens. And in order to engage with a thing, we must immerse ourselves in its self-same medium, whose energies and movements comprise the generative property of both the thing and the world which is coming into form itself (120). In a style of analysis Steward labels “compositional theory”, we must observe the colliding point of “interiority and world” and how this conflict, which is at the very heart of experience, is involved with a thing becoming “thing” (119).

It is possible that what we hear in my composition are not sounds or objects, but “things” generated from the fluxes of sound. These “things”, always coming into form themselves, comprise the broader sounded "thing” I have created. We listen to the things happening within the composition—whether it is the dissected practice session of the Sage Chapel organist or the indifferent ringing of a construction truck—and hear their coming into form, their constant, open emergence into something. They are not firmly planted objects. They are always moving, always in tune with energies of the medium of sound, and hearing those things means hearing the “thing” I’ve created become itself. An intensive listening to my composition, then, would be the sort of “empirical attunement” Steward identifies as necessary for the “animacy of things” (120). The listener would be placed within the medium and asked to dialogue, work, or calibrate with the thing.

We see now that there need not be a clash between the “sonic climate” and the “thing”. Both these conceptions of my composition include that sense of movement or energy within sound which combats the idea that sound abides by the subject-object division. While Stewart may label the focus of the “thing” as the point between “interiority and world”, as internal and external, she is not far off from Ingold’s rejection of soundscape in favor of a viewpoint which stresses that sound is derived from the same phenomena of experience as Stewart’s “sensations, vibrations, movements, and intensities” (Stewart 120).

What is most important from these notions, however, is that they throw away the subject-object divide in order to understand the forces of the world. They do not consign themselves to a simplistic binary. Through sound—a medium whose uniqueness and necessity I’ve hopefully displayed—they attempt to express a thinking for the time of the anthropocene. Perhaps the composition could even work within the realm of the “cthulucene”, as a “sym-chthonic” expression. Its weaving of things seeping into and out of recognition could equate to the “entangling” of the multiplicity of times and spaces of the “cthulucene” (Haraway “Anthropocene…”). But regardless of the composition’s label, regardless of the frameworks which think of these labels, I hope it has functioned as something beyond the argument I am making here. I hope it better erodes the subject-object framework than mere theorization of its erosion. I hope it moves us closer to a particular understanding of reality necessary for an existence and hope past the dire threats of the anthropocene.

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