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Editorial: A Sonic Geography: Rethinking Auditory Spatial Practices

By Rachel O'Dwyer

The project for *A Sonic Geography* began with a recognition of the vibrancy and increasing significance of various bodies of work on auditory space. Creative practices such as aural architecture, soundscaping, spatial music and sonic sculpture have found, on the one hand, a non-specialist public and on the other, an institutional legitimacy that fosters future development. Moreover, theoretical research tracing sonic phenomena as cartography, site-specific signifier, or spatial strategy has acquired a new level of maturity in recent years. Significant publications in the past decade including *The Soundscape of Modernity* by Emily Thompson, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* by Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* by Michael Bull, and *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* by Brandon Labelle, cement this theoretical evolution, while the English translation of CRESSON's *Sonic Experience: A Guide To Everyday Sounds* in 2006 marks the dissemination of one of the most thoroughly actualized research programs investigating sound in various spatial contexts. *Interference* wishes to progress this interaction between theoretical reflection from different domains of research and sustained practical experimentation as it generates new possibilities for auditory spatial awareness.

This sustained interest in auditory spatial practice might result from a general epistemological shift away from the neutral, physically bounded spaces of Cartesian geography toward a relational framework that treats space as the ongoing performance of people, objects, codes, and practices. A spatial epistemology that tends towards the fluid, the contingent, and the socially produced facilitates a discussion of sonic practices as inherently spatial. Auditory spatial practices, in turn, implicitly challenge the concept that a terrain is somehow comprised of elements that are straightforwardly empirical, objective and mappable.

Many of the papers in this issue of *Interference* turn on the double nature of sound as both a locating and dislocating phenomenon. On the one hand, sound weaves places together (de Certeau, 1984) through acoustic channels that metre and locate individually lived and temporally contingent experiences of space. Some of our authors study these nested interactions: the movement of sonic forms, the intervallic content of rhythmic or melodic sequences, or the resonant traces of acoustic communities and territories. On the other, many of the papers acknowledge that sound just as often displaces, through the physical disturbance of matter a propagating waveform effects or the complex production of mobile, virtual or networked spaces media affords. A margin carried on the air will not fix. It ebbs and flows to the extent that any enduring demarcation of territory is a visual rather than a sonic project. We could consider Corbin's now familiar story of the village bell, whose peel sounded out a fluid and fluctuating boundary of the township (Corbin, 1998). Sound moves and removes, and yet this facility does not counter the inherently spatial nature of so much sonic experience.

The body of theoretical and practical work presented here suggests that this tension between dominant representations of space and a sonic geography is a productive situation for spatial praxis, pedagogy, and epistemology, and furthermore, might suggest strategies for occupying or reclaiming spaces.

"I LOVE IT, IN SPACE THERE ARE NO LIMITS, I LOVE IT" (2001) INK ON WALL BY GRAHAM GUSSIN

In 'The Sound of Ruins', Lawson Fletcher outlines a political project for post-rock as it interacts with the post-industrial landscape. This performs an elegy for the spatial erasures of late capitalism in two different expressions of the genre: the music of Canadian group God Speed You Black Emperor and the audiovisual practices of Icelandic ensemble Sigur Ros, represented in the documentary *Heima*.

The 'ruin' is a spectral geography, a temporal fissure that continues to ghost the present. Fletcher explores the resonances between the site of architectural ruins – as Toronto and Iceland's respective industrial histories – with the role of sound as a spectral revenant: decaying before it is fully 'present', and yet lingering on to make that present waver, like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the object world shimmers like a mirage. Such a project is particularly worthy of attention today, where ruins are more than simply detritus of an industrial past, becoming instead central – as cultural and symbolic capital – to a post-Fordist economy that feeds on what is marginal. Such margins include areas of urban decay and the underground cultural scenes that thrive therein. Mark Fisher (2011) has questioned the possibility for both cultural outputs and forms of political dissent to resist assimilation under these conditions. In a similar vein, Fletcher discusses how Sigur Ros are often identified with a nationalistic project that leverages the value of cultural authenticity with pastoral and folkloric motifs. This discourse opens paths to profitable exploitation. But just as the project of post-rock therefore might appear to be inculcated to tourism or forms of urban gentrification, Fletcher identifies how these sonic practices constitute an 'auditory drift' that performs its own subtle counter-narrative. To this end, Fletcher describes the interaction of sound and ruin in a performance by the band in an abandoned factory in the town of Djúpavik, a former industrial hub, now a cultural heritage site.

Similar problems are engaged in Will Schrimshaw's paper 'Any Place Whatever.' Both gesture to the possibilities that emerge through the simultaneously situating and schizophonic (Schafer, 1977) qualities of sound recording and site-specific performance. Schrimshaw explores the tensions this duality produces between the figurative and the abstract in field recording. If a field recording is understood as an indexical trace, faithfully documenting the acoustic cartography of a given territory, it is also a shifting signifier, subject to various degrees of temporal and spatial disjuncture, erasure and decay. Like a map in search of a territory, the soundscape is differential as opposed to absolute. It hovers somewhere between tracing and erasure.

The map can no longer confine itself to the description of a static territory, as it is called to account for the multiplicity and general mutability of contemporary spaces. In light of this tension, Schrimshaw considers the creative practices of Francisco López and Asher Thal-Nir. In doing so, he also takes the opportunity to rethink some of the now hegemonic theories in the literature on sonic space as they engage with concepts such as fidelity and site-specificity. Schrimshaw acknowledges that a common dialectic (and corresponding aesthetic positions) are established between the Schaferian notion of 'schizophonia,' as a technological artefact that divorces the listener from an immediate communion with their environment, and the implied responsibility of mediated practices such as soundscaping and field recording to faithfully evoke any space. Schrimshaw's analysis weaves its way through this dichotomy to imagine how a plastic relationship to site, encountered in the work of López and Thal-Nir, produces a uniquely mediated position from which to re-integrate the listener into the acoustic environment. Rather than thinking of these recordings as verifiable acts of documentation or sonic cartography, there is another tendency towards a poetic displacement in the field recording – a pervasive sense that other possible spaces are exposed in the friction between formal enquiry and a wilful imagining.

Yolande Harris also troubles the boundaries between these practices in 'Understanding Underwater: an Experiential Approach to the Art and Science of Whale Sounds'. This paper describes the 'audification' and 'sonification' of subaqueous environments (Harris, 2010). These two practices infer different modes of sonic representation of environmental strata. The former is

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closer to documentary, relying on existing vibratory signals as its basis. The latter implies a series of transductive and interpretative acts in order to make an otherwise illegible aspect of the environment humanly audible. This is in many ways closer to composition.

Harris's research is grounded in acoustic ecology, where vibratory phenomena are understood to be indicative of the overall equilibrium of an environment. Her practice, on the other hand, is as a composer and sound artist who creatively engages these spaces. Here, both traditionally musical and empirical modes of representation and analysis are brought together. This material is used in turn to informationalise, dramatise and otherwise engage issues such as ecological sustainability and climate change. This overall discussion of transdisciplinary enquiry is contextualised with an outline of Harris' own artistic and compositional practice in the *Scorescapes* project, described as a blend of music transcription, inscription and cartography in response to her underwater research.

One of the founding concerns of *A Sonic Geography* was what appears to be the mutual progression of auditory spatial analysis alongside burgeoning non-representational and relational frameworks in geography. Many of our authors trace a sonic geography that evolves through mutual acquaintance. Where Harris extends a relational approach to non-human environments, Candice Boyd and Michelle Duffy explore the role of shared sonic experiences in human geography in their paper 'Sonic Geographies of Shifting Bodies.' There is an emphasis on the ongoing performative dimensions of spaces, concerned with the movements of individual bodies and the rhythms of everyday practice. Drawing on Lefebvrian analysis, the authors explore how bodies, sounds and their nested rhythms come together to territorialise and condition affective spaces.

We might consider here Harris' exploration of echolocation in whales. This is a fascinating mode of spatial orientation where either a human or animal senses the contours of a local environment through the interaction of sound waves as these reflect between physical objects and the contours of the self. The 'echo' becomes a conflation of sound and space. Similarly, Boyd and Duffy explore the role of sound as affective contagion, in which a spatial subjectivity is produced through the proliferation of shared rhythmic experiences. In both instances, this is not geography as an echoic chamber or sound as a signal that traverses space, but a way of substantiating sound-space as a communicative and affective property. Harris asks us to theorise the relation between sender and receiver in terms of a spatial context rather than an unmediated communication. In a similar vein, Boyd and Duffy identify sound as integral to the ways in which places and subjectivities are co-constituted.

An interesting complement here is Catharina Dyrssen et al.'s paper 'The Sonic Labyrinth', a practice-based research account by the Urban Sound Institute (USIT), of which the authors are a part. This was a one year project comprising a full scale explorative and interactive sound-art experiment conducted for Murberget Regional Museum in Härnösand, Northern Sweden. Touching on many of the topics explored in other papers, the project addresses the broader remit of auditory spatial relations. This knowledge is grounded in curatorial considerations for the display of sound art, installation and sculpture within the museum and/or gallery space.

The paper addresses *The Sonic Labyrinth* project from a number of perspectives: looking at the exhibition as a platform for social and pedagogical collaborations; as a holistic space; and as a spatial composition. In this final respect the authors expand the aesthetic and musical considerations required for architectonic composition, structured by the movement and progression of bodies through a compositional space, as opposed to the temporal progression of musical events around a static listener. Finally they identify the relational spaces that emerge from the conflation of these three practices, using the project as the basis for reflection and speculation on how these might contribute to future approaches to praxis and pedagogy.

The five papers published in *Interference* include not only the textual artefacts outlining the authors theoretical frameworks and findings, but significant audio and visual fragments. This approach blends writing with praxis, using the architecture of the online journal to draw the reader through a landscape that interleaves a written text with rich media artefacts of the authors' research. This method is particularly evident in Boyd and Duffy's paper, blending the authors' textual rhythmanalysis with an extended audio recording of a student cafe space in Melbourne. Here listening accompanies reading. Moreover, this approach is illustrative of the overall strength of the contributions to *A Sonic Geography*. These papers all represent a mode of enquiry in which diverse theoretical material is brought together and worked through in a very practical sense.

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Graham Gussin; "I Love It, In Space there Are No Limits, I Love It" Ink on wall; 2001; Photo courtesy of the artist. http://www.grahamgussin.co.uk/

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