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## Transcendigital Imagination: Developing Organs of Subtle Perception

By *Kim Cascone*

### Abstract

With the advent of cheap digital recording gear, many have taken to recording their environments and presenting it as sound art. Without considering how technology leaches the soul of an environment, much of today's field recording based sound art will ultimately fail to capture the holistic nuance and subtleties found in nature. What this essay calls for is a resurrection and development of the post-digital aesthetic in the form of "Transcendigitalism."

The illusion of life was absolute: mobility of expression, the continual working of the lungs, speech, various actions, walking – nothing was missing. Raymond Roussel (2011)

### Resurrectine

Martial Canterel, the proprietor of the surreal compound featured in Raymond Roussel's (2011) surrealist novel *Locus Solus* leans over a corpse laying on a hospital gurney inside a glass-walled refrigerated building. With careful precision he drills a hole in the corpse's skull just above one ear, then injects a syringe of Resurrectine<sup>1</sup> into the cranial cavity. After the liquid floods the corpse's skull, he slides a small bar of Vitalium into the hole and the corpse jolts to life.

The corpse shifts off the gurney and begins to reenact a random scene from its life. Canterel and his assistants have provided props and extra actors to complete the ghoulish tableau as the family of the deceased watch in delight while their reanimated loved-one plods through its one-act play.

The theme of reanimation, or resurrection, of the dead is not new; it is resurrected time and again in fiction, films and television. And many of our spiritual mythologies and religious stories are also built upon the theme of death and resurrection of a spiritual leader or prophet. Even the culture of sound art unknowingly participates in this act of reanimation. Sound recording – in particular field recording and sampling – can be likened to storing sound in a digital mausoleum, later to be reanimated via playback.

### Searching for the Soul

In a forest, a figure trudges along a path, apparently carrying some sort of electronic equipment. The figure comes to a stop and begins recording sounds with a microphone. A whistle of wind in the pine needles above, bird songs embroider the distant waves of highway traffic, a jet noisily clambers its flight path to cruising altitude. The figure remains motionless, microphone outstretched, eyes closed, immersed in the ambiance of the forest. After collecting some sound, the figure scrambles back on to the trail, twigs and leaves crunching underfoot and gradually passes from view. Cut to: a bedroom sound studio. The figure from the forest is now seated behind a laptop. A small mixing board sits off to one side and two loudspeakers loom in front. The figure taps the space bar on a laptop and suddenly, like the corpse in *Locus Solus*, the forest sounds jump to life: birds, wind, distant traffic, the distant jet plane—the sound of the forest is reanimated and dances in the speakers. While listening to the recording, a puzzled expression flashes over the face of the recordist. The sound of the forest now seems two-dimensional, flat, lifeless, corpse-like. Although the sound is technically perfect, it lacks the enchantment experienced in the forest. Baffled, the recordist twists at some knobs on the mixing board searching for something missing in the sound – the soul of the forest.

This is a common experience for many new recordists. They have yet to learn that the microphone collapses sound into a flat aural plane, then stores it in the recorder as a granulated stream of quantized data. It can be confusing at first, but recording removes the soul from a sonic landscape.

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### ISSUE 4 PHOTO CREDIT

Mark Peter Wright; *Exchanges*; 2013; Image courtesy of the artist. See [Still Listening?](#) for details.

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Audio-visual technology, by virtue of its nature, collapses the dimensionality of sound and light phenomena while transforming it for electro-mechanical storage. What is returned from storage is a corpse-like version of what went in. But we've learned to suspend our disbelief and unconsciously adjust for it. For example, we know full well that a movie is not real, but our brain activity reflects that we are experiencing a real event. A warning label should come affixed to all audio recording equipment: 'sensation does not equal experience'.

### The Desouling of the World

Everything that is dead quivers. Not only the things of poetry, stars, moon, wood, flowers, but even a white trouser button glittering out of a puddle in the street...Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks. Wassily Kandinsky (1977)

Our technologically-oriented society is heavily invested in maintaining a reductionist-materialist world-view. We see the world as objects to be consumed, controlled or transformed to suit our needs. Only the data or phenomenon that can be measured, analysed and explained according to the laws of physics is sanctioned as being real. Other 'ways of knowing' the world, e.g., the spiritual, mystical or poetic—knowledge which is unable to be validated by science—have become devalued or even taboo in many cases.

As a result, we have come to see ourselves as separate from nature. Even language upholds a rigid subject/object distinction; we learn to trust only what we experience with our physical senses as being real and even then only if it can be scientifically validated. This materialist world-view has supplanted the spiritual and some feel that our dismissal of spiritual experience helps explain the state of our world: rampant consumerism, selfishness and greed, exploitation of fellow humans and animals, depletion and pollution of natural resources, a populace fuelled by an insatiable desire for material wealth—all of which reflects the atrophying of our spiritual knowledge. It is our materialist consciousness that blinds us to nature's holistic web of energy, that ephemeral energy, or soul, missing from the forest recording.

Technology reduces the creative process to a set of primitive actions, a series of functional modules that, when patched together, form a workflow which produces a cultural artifact. In writing about the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan, author J.M. Culkin states: "We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us" (1967). In our conflation of tool and message, imagination ceases to express itself through technology; rather it is technology that funnels and shapes our imagination and expresses itself through the artwork.

### Resurrecting World-Building

Other forms of awareness and connections to other, more subtle and fleeting forms are available to us through epiphanies, synchronicities, mystical experiences, and other special moments when individual human consciousness merges into something much greater. Our minds and bodies all have access to the same creative source that animates every atom and star. The world is created in unitary thought is only the smallest fragment of a much greater reality, for we can live and have direct awareness of the universe that is beyond all forms, images, and theories. F. David Peat (1991)

Philosopher Owen Barfield proposes in his book *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1988) that reality, i.e., everything that exists 'out there' is merely a sub-atomic world of potential that our sense-perception encapsulates into an outer layer or a shell that we organise into physical objects reposing in an externalized field that we call reality. With the discovery of quantum mechanics we now know that our perception of the phenomenal world is largely dependent upon the perceiver's organising mode of consciousness<sup>2</sup>, and that the perceiver and the observed phenomenon form a single seamless whole. Knowing this, it becomes evident that our perceptual awareness, based in a materialist consciousness, is rooted in a false duality, one that limits our ability to fully experience the world as artists.

But there is a state of awareness that we all have access to if we so choose, one that is in need of being resurrected.

Throughout history, philosophers have called this perceptual state of awareness by various names: the supersensible, mundus imaginalis, imaginal perception, active imagination, subtle realm, participatory consciousness—each term points to a heightened state of perceptual awareness—perhaps better explained as feeling the "presence in which the essence of a thing is fully manifested in its existence" (Avens 1988 p. 385). Holistic physicist and author F. David Peat writes, "once the barriers between inner and outer, inscape and landscape, are dissolved, and fixed responses give way to fluid and complex actions, then a new form of active perception can be practiced" (1991 p. 217). It is my belief

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that this state of 'imaginative-perception' is missing in sound art today, and that in order to revive the project of world-building in art, it is first necessary to resurrect this state of awareness.

### New Organs of Perception

The human being knows himself only insofar as he knows the world; he perceives the world only in himself, and himself only in the world. Every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Mueller 1952 p. 235)

Many listening workshops – albeit well-intentioned – make a fundamental mistake: they unwittingly perpetuate a materialist world-view by focusing on the *sensory-perception* of sound while neglecting *imaginative-perception*. The mode of sense perception is one that we use on a daily basis: we modulate our perceptual scope and focus in order to selectively attend to event-objects occurring in the outer world. The listener (in here) hears a sonic event-object (out there). The listener remains separate from the environment.

In his book *The Wholeness of Nature*, psychologist and philosopher Henri Bortoft describes these two modes of awareness as “onlooker consciousness” and “participatory consciousness” (1996). Onlooker consciousness, or sensory-perception, maintains a subject/object duality, while participatory consciousness, or imaginative-perception, transcends this dualism by merging subject and object into a holistic continuum of consciousness. Again, quantum physics tells us the same thing: the observer affects the observed reality. Or in the context of sound art: the listener becomes the listening and the listening becomes the sound.

Psychologist and writer John Welwood describes this imaginative mode of awareness as one in which the listener: “feels out and integrates whole textures and networks of relationships, in ways that are impossible for the serial method of focal attention” (1977 p. 15). Welwood further suggests that imaginative-perception “allows us to recast the inner/outer duality in a different way. Inner truth, inner reality does not refer to a realm of the psyche inside the organism, but rather to the living, dynamic, holistic process that shapes and structures the outer reality of constituent parts” (1977 p. 20). In other words, the listener experiences sound as a continuous holistic field of relations, rather than separate, discrete, sonic event-objects.

By constantly funnelling our attention through the lens of duality, we rob ourselves of the capacity to experience the world in a deeper, more direct way. By opening oneself to experiencing the world as a continuum as opposed to a duality, the artist can resume the task of world-building. In order for sound artists to resurrect and develop their imaginative-perception, they need a different approach to a purely sensory-based mode of listening.

### Binary/Dualism Transcended

If we wish to awaken in mankind the true artistic mood, we must, to a certain degree, transport ourselves back into those ancient times when the celestial, the poetic mood, lived in the human soul. Rudolf Steiner (1964 p. 62)

Creating new circuits in art means creating them in the brain. Gilles Deleuze (1997 p. 26)

When we shift from our materialist-only consciousness towards a holistic one, we will no longer experience the world as ‘inner’ or ‘outer’. As this distinction disappears we are less dominated by sensory awareness as our imaginative awareness becomes heightened, non-local, fluidic and malleable. John Welwood better explains this state of imaginative awareness, “From a Buddhist perspective this pure awareness is our original nature, and meditation is the major way to let it emerge from its normally submerged background role” (1977 p. 19). I will save enumerating the various techniques that can help artists develop their imaginative-perception for another time, but I will briefly mention here that daily meditation is the most effective means for accomplishing any inner work. In a piece I wrote for a magazine (Cascone 2012), I describe my experience with meditation while studying music in college and how I began to sense the world in a very different way. This enabled me to tap into the rich world of my unconscious, which led me down a very different artistic path than what my music school was pointing to. My imaginative-perception had become so heightened that I was compelled to translate what I heard in my ‘mind’s ear’ into the world through electronic music. This technique of quieting the mind and allowing the unconscious to come to the surface is the most powerful tool for any artist wanting to develop ‘new organs of perception’.

### Being Transcendigital

All the arts concerned with things in accordance with nature are contained within Man himself. Plotinus (Ennead III viii) (Katz 1950 p. 41)

Cut to: We are back in our forest scenario. Again, we see the sound recordist with their microphone and recorder, but rather than perceiving sonic event-objects as existing in the outer world, they are perceived as contiguous with the imagination. In this heightened state of imaginative awareness one becomes open to the myriad narratives that surround oneself. Transcending the technology, one becomes attuned to the subtle synchronicities in the fabric of sound flows.

In the forest, not only are the patterns heard, and the meaning contained in the whole understood, but the whole forest is heard in each sound as well. A fabric of sonic synchronicities permeates the forest, the mundus imaginalis unfolds, the veil is lifted and the continuity of nature is revealed.

Back in the studio, the narrative re-emerges from a palimpsest of synchronicities hidden in the recordings. Technology recedes into the background as imagination becomes foregrounded. A spark of life is imbued in the corpse of sound extracted from the digital realm, not as an act of reanimation from without, but as resurrection from within. A transcendigitalism occurs, allowing the mundus imaginalis to flow through a circuit completed by technology and into the materialist world of atoms and bits. By developing new organs of perception we can let art flow *through technology* rather than *from it*.

#### Footnotes

1. Ressurrectine and Vitalium are fictional substances invented by the protagonist Martial Canterel in 'Locus Solus' [“"]
2. "What we observe is not nature herself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."  
Werner Heisenberg Quote [“"]

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**Bio**

Kim Cascone has a long history involving electronic music: he received his formal training in electronic music at the Berklee College of Music in the early 1970's, and in 1976 continued his studies with Dana McCurdy at the New School in New York City. After moving to San Francisco in the 1980's, and gaining experience as an electronic technician in the audio industry, Cascone worked with David Lynch as Assistant Music Editor on both "Twin Peaks" and "Wild at Heart." Cascone left the film industry in 1991 to concentrate on his company Silent Records, a label that he founded in 1986, transforming it into the U.S.'s premier ambient electronic music label. At the height of Silent's success in early 1996, he sold the company in order to pursue a career as a sound designer for Thomas Dolby's company Headspace. After a two year stint at Headspace he worked for Staccato Systems as the Director of Content where he oversaw sound design using algorithmic synthesis for video games. Since 2001 Kim has been touring Europe performing, conducting workshops and lecturing on post-digital aesthetics in sound art. Kim has released more than 40 albums of electronic music since 1984 and has recorded/performed with Merzbow, Keith Rowe, Tony Conrad, Scanner, John Tilbury, and Pauline Oliveros among others. Cascone is the founder of the .microsound list which focuses on post-digital music and laptop performance <http://www.microsound.org> and his writing has been published in Computer Music Journal (MIT Press), Artbyte, Soundcultures, Parachute Journal, Junk Jet, Geometer; he has guest edited and written for Contemporary Music Review and acts as an advisor to the journal "Interference" based in Dublin, Ireland. Kim is a citizen of both the USA and Italy and lives on the coast of California, south of San Francisco, with his wife Kathleen and son Cage.

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