

What we are hearing if we are just quiet:
An analysis of the new media art, phonography

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What we are hearing if we are just quiet
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Table of contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
1. Acoustic ecology	8
2. Egolessness	12
3. Aesthetic realism	17
4. The readymade	20
5. Magnification of the ‘small sound’	23
6. <i>Musique concrète</i>	25
Conclusion	28
Acknowledgements	31
Bibliography	32

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

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ABSTRACT

The new media art, phonography, has its conceptual roots in the aesthetic constraints of many different disciplines. The work of artists in the phonographic medium are compared to the work of artists in the disciplines in which phonography is rooted. The relationship between phonography and music is discussed, as is the idea of what to listen for in phonography.

Introduction

“... Someone said, must it be a tam-tam? I said no, I can imagine the score being used to examine an old Volkswagen musically, to go inside the old thing and bang it and scratch it and do all sorts of things to it, and play *MIKROPHONIE I*, using the microphone...” (Karlheinz Stockhausen)

Christopher Burns, “Realizing Lucier and Stockhausen”

In the late 1990s artists from all over the world began a dialogue, through an e-mail list, about creating field recordings and their presentation to the public. From that dialogue, an aesthetic of making field recordings and presenting them as art objects developed. In those recordings the presence of the artist is omitted from the scene of the recording and the will of the artist is absent in the presentation. No editing, sound processing¹, or changes are made to the recordings at all. What began with a few people and an idea grew. CD compilations featuring different artists were released. With the help of the e-mail list, a website, and the CD compilations, the medium referred to as phonography by the artists grew to include established artists whose work fit that description and new artists.

Audiences can hear phonographic works in a few ways. Compact disc releases are most common. The availability of inexpensive CD-R technology gave birth to the phonography compilations and many other releases. A few small-scale record labels have released

¹ Sound processing is often used for the purpose of making material more easily comprehensible, as in reducing bass to remove the sound of the wind. By no processing, I mean use of sound processing like echo or distortion applied to the taste of the artist.

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

phonographic works. Some artists work with material broadcast on the radio; there are a few programs in the United States (to a lesser degree) and internationally that specialize in experimental recordings and have given some attention to phonography. Occasionally a single phonographer or groups of phonographers will present their recordings in a live performance format. Live performances can feature several phonographers improvising by carefully mixing each other's recordings together, or presenting each other's work in turn. Some performers will combine field recording playback with sparse electronics. Phonographic works are sometimes heard in a public or gallery installation context, over headphones or over speakers.

Field recordings have been used in many different media. The discipline is integral to commercial broadcast, film, and video. The unique thing about the use of field recordings in phonography is that the recordings are presented outside of the conventional contexts provided by film/video, in which a field recording is background sound or sound effect synchronized to image, or with narration in broadcast, in which a field recording is used to add the element of realism.

Phonographic pieces are often considered in a musical light, due to the fact that they share the contexts of live performance and compact disc release. Though some phonographers are also musicians or composers and consider their work music, listening to a phonographic work is not necessarily a musical experience. The significant differences between phonography and music involve the expectations of the artist and his audience. A musical piece deals with abstracted sound information mainly in terms of pitch, timbre, pulse, and rhythm. (Snyder 195)

When listening to phonographic works we listen as we would listen to our regular sound environment: looking for cues that tell us about the world around, for context rather than

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

abstraction. Westerkamp says of phonography that “(it) is *always* rooted in themes of the sound environment. It is never abstract.” (SC 2) This is particularly true of Westerkamp’s specific discipline, that of acoustic ecology. However, some phonographers choose to work with sounds that appear very abstracted or even completely unrecognizable.

What we will do here is discuss a few of the ideas that preceded phonography and look at how they contributed to the formation of its unique concept. Not all phonographers follow these ideas to the letter: rules, especially in art, are made to be broken. But many phonographers keep these ideas in mind when considering their work.

Acoustic ecology, the discipline that studies the importance of and changes to our sonic environment, calls attention to the cultural and psychological significance of our natural and artificial sound environments. Its central concept is that of the soundscape: a sound environment, natural, musical or artificial, that exists in relationship to the listener. Phonography owes its recognition of the soundscape and its meaning to us to the acoustic ecology movement.

The ideas developed by John Cage assign aesthetic value to the patterns created by any sound event, and attributes the egolessness of the artist in the creative process as an asset. Phonography, by presenting environmental recordings objectively, with little if any interaction from the artist, is indebted to this school of thought.

Aesthetic realism, having grown from photography, assigned aesthetic value to everyday form. Phonography recognizes the realist school by presenting works in which the hand of the artist is only seen in the creation of the frame.

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

Marcel Duchamp's idea of the readymade, an object that placed in context becomes art, is significant. Phonography is related to the readymade as it is to realism: it asks the listener to accept its product, the field recording, as art because the artist has presented it as such.

The idea of the amplification and magnification of small sounds, to present an unique perspective on an everyday object, is another component of phonography, in which we create a new context for listening to the everyday.

The aesthetic of *musique concrète*, in which sounds are subjugated to the will of the composer, preceded phonography by more than fifty years. It owes its origin to the development of magnetic tape technology, and is related to phonography in that phonography is a reaction to the idea of using recordings as material to be manipulated.

1. Acoustic ecology

I recall meeting a young Australian composer who told me that he had given up writing music after becoming infatuated with the beauties of cricket song. But when asked how, when and why crickets sang, he couldn't say; he just liked taping them and playing them back to large audiences. I told him: a composer owes it to the cricket to know such things... Here is where the composer becomes biologist, physiologist – himself cricket.

R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape:
Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*

The acoustic ecology movement is an international effort researching the changes in environmental sound and their effects, specifically concerned with the effects of industrialization and urbanization on the sound environment. It began through the efforts of the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC in the 1970s. The WSP focused on comparative study of the global soundscape and published its findings both in print, audio media and broadcast. (Truax HAE 152) The World Forum for Acoustic Ecology evolved from the WSP and since the 1990s has been a center for research and dialogue on the subject.

The researchers of the World Soundscape Project saw the phonographic works of the acoustic ecology movement as soundscape recordings. The idea of the soundscape is that of a sonic identity of a place, formed by that place's most recognizable sounds. A soundwalk is a sonic venture through a soundscape that uses time and distance to point out specific characteristics of that soundscape. (Truax HAE 130) Recordings made of soundscapes and

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

soundwalks can be said to be the first deliberate phonographic works. Though the WSP members viewed their research as primarily didactic, uncovering information about changes to the soundscape, all of them identified themselves as composers and artists.

It's likely that the most important artifact of the World Soundscape Project is the book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World* by R. Murray Schafer, one of the original WSP members. Published as *The Tuning of the World* in 1977, this book served to describe the research conducted by the WSP, and to communicate their conclusion: that changes in our industrialized soundscape have a negative effect on individuals and society.

Our understanding of phonography is informed by Schafer's concept of *schizophonia*: psychological confusion between real and artificial sounds. Schafer suggests it is inherent to the modern psyche, due to the presence of audible recordings in our lives. (TOTW 90-91) While a phonographic recording refers to soundscape, and creates cues that we respond to as if it were our real sound environment, Schafer's concept of schizophonia suggests that we respond with confusion because our listening apparatus can tell the difference. This creates an interesting paradox: listening to a phonography can serve to make us more aware of our soundscape but it also alienates us from actually interacting in it, making us confused as to what is real and what is artifice. Westerkamp resolves that contradiction here, by suggesting that a phonographic work can resolve that conflict.

In the face of wide-spread commercial media and leased music corporations, who strategically try to use the schizophonic medium to transport potential customers into a state of aural unawareness and unconscious behavior and ultimately into the act of

spending money-in the face of such forces the soundscape composition can and should perhaps create a strong oppositional place of conscious listening. (SC 2)

While Westerkamp's idea of the soundscape composition involves recordings of soundscapes, which are by definition schizophonic, it is the presentation of the material to an audience conditioned to listen to the material sensitively that encourages such conscious listening.

In the original days of the WSP, and now, the term 'soundscape composition' is used to refer to a creative interpretation of a soundscape. The soundscape composition's creativity is seen as coming from the artist's selection of equipment and location, not from editing or processing of the recording. Barry Truax wrote that soundscape compositions were distinguished from other sound art disciplines in that the source sounds stayed recognizable to the ear of the listener. (SC 9) He asserted that, in soundscape compositions, the listener is encouraged to 'fill in the blanks' with his own knowledge of the sound environment, and hopefully would have his/her own knowledge of the sound environment broadened. The goal should be "the re-integration of the listener with the environment in a balanced ecological relationship." (SC 13-14).

It's unlikely that Bernie Krause identifies himself as a phonographer or even an artist, but he definitely applies a lot of creativity in his work, the presentation of field recordings from all over the world. Krause is a bio-acoustician, one who studies the sounds generated by living things (Krause WS 151). A recording made in Zimbabwe by Krause is particularly intriguing. In it, baboons can be heard using the rocky outcroppings (*kopjes*) to create huge calls that echo throughout the forest. The baboons are definitely in the background to the foreground sounds of insects and birds; but their presence is more heavily weighted due to their use of the unique features of the Zimbabwean soundscape. Some of Krause's concerns, like the acoustic ecology

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

movement, have to do with the intrusion of noise into our soundscape; for example, in *Wild Soundscapes*, he points out that there is a much lower incidence of hearing loss in non-industrialized cultures. (5) In his paper “Loss of Natural Soundscape,” he refers to the fact that making field recordings without the intrusion of the sounds of industrialization is getting harder and harder, as more and more of the earth is industrialized. (4) Again, Krause’s work is not quite phonography, but in the presentation of his recordings as creative pieces, and in his role as an acoustic ecologist, his work is definitely relevant to our understanding of phonography.

2. Egolessness

“If you want to know the truth of the matter, the music I prefer, even to my own or anybody else’s, is what we are hearing if we are just quiet. And now we come back to my silent piece. I really prefer that to anything else, but I don’t think of it as ‘my piece’.”

(John Cage) Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*

The challenging aesthetic put forth by John Cage is an important concept in the aesthetic of phonography. In his work and writing Cage looked at the division between the soundscape and the concert hall, suggesting that the instructions of composers interpreted by musicians is only one way to make music. Cage’s work questions the necessity of determinism to the composer through the use of chance operations and naturally random situations as guiding principles in his notated music, or incorporating them outright instead of explicit notation. One of the avenues that Cage worked with is the use of the soundscape. In *Silence*, Cage wrote

For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. (Cage 7-8)

His piece *4’33”* is a score for a performer to not play his instrument for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The piece, originally written for piano, was later expanded to include any instrument in any time interval. *4’33”* is meant to provide a context for the listener to hear the soundscape of the concert hall as a musical piece. Kahn said of *4’33”*

(it) entailed rejecting the importance of whether a musical sound was present or absent within a composition and, in the process, extending the field of artistic materiality to all the nonintentional sounds surrounding the performance – that is, by shifting the production of music from the site of utterance to that of audition. (158)

Kahn refers to *4'33''*'s extramusical gravity: its ability to draw in sounds not conventionally thought of as musical. Dalgleish looks at *4'33''*'s opposite effect. Rather than its ability to assimilate non-musical sounds, it calls attention to those sounds outside of the context of music, as in phonography.

The concert hall... is a supposedly hermetically sealed space, where music, performance or artwork exists devoid of the restrictions of time that universally exist in the outside world... *4'33''* makes both of these spaces problematic by opening up the space to the outside through making it transparent. *4'33''* not only acknowledges the fact that environmental events are taking place at all times, it acknowledges that they also take place anywhere, not just within the concert hall or gallery. (22)

The Cagean aesthetic both collects contextual information from the soundscape and points to a soundscape as something that can be appreciated strictly for its aesthetic value, where every audible event is equally weighted.

Cage... extended the process of incorporation to a point to every audible, potentially audible, and mythically audible sounds... and he formalized the performance of music to where it could be dependent on listening alone. (Kahn 164)

One of Cage's intentions was to get the audience listening to the soundscape for aesthetic enjoyment, saying that after one of his concerts, audience members might "hear unsuspected beauty in their daily life." Cage elaborates on this idea, saying that

The noise in the city would not be physically diminished, but the city-dwelling concertgoers would accommodate themselves to it by appreciating it differently, removing the aggravation if not the noise, while both noise and aggravation would continue to exist for non-concert-going city dwellers. In further statements, such facility pertained to self-betterment – becoming more open to the world, trying to exist peacefully with it – and to the negotiation of his own tastes. (Kahn 184)

Sterling's reference to "discover rather than invent" is a direct echo of Cage's idea of indeterminacy. The artist would frame the context of an event through the medium. In the case of Cage, that medium was a musical score and concert performance. Phonography employs the same aesthetic with the medium being a recording, which can be heard live, or broadcast, or on demand as a CD or on the WWW. Cage's point is that music is found not in what we listen to, but in the way that we hear it.

Cage's rejection of the place of the artist's ego in music is significant to the idea of phonography. Rather than control sounds as a composer controls instruments, he left them alone to compose themselves.

...after a certain point communication, ideas and intention were also to be expunged so all that was left was a *sound in itself*. (Kahn 164-165)

His ideas about removing the composer's ego from the composition imply that the listener is inclined to prefer material driven by the will of the composer. If an audience can be

What we are hearing if we are just quiet
Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

trained to accept indeterminacy on the part of the composer, then they might be able to accept natural indeterminacy as a composition of its own. Magnusson suggests that 4'33" was intended to "liberate the performer and the composer from having to make any conscious decisions." (19)

Phonography echoes this sentiment in that it entails the presentation of a recording as a creative product, to be listened to not only for the contextual information about space and place but as an aesthetic experience. In Zen Buddhism, it's understood that the presence of a quality can be felt most through its absence, as in a lost tooth: unnoticed until gone. Phonography similarly refers to the idea of the limited involvement of the artist, who betrays his presence only by selection of the material to be recorded, and the method of recording. Since all other elements are left to chance, the will of the artist is compounded in these spare criteria, and it is in those choices that we can hear the artist's voice much more clearly.

Cage's tape/electroacoustic works did not always live up to his rhetoric about removing the ego of the composer. Typically they involved taking ordered sound (tape recordings, radio, LP) and disordering it through a randomly determined procedure. His *Williams Mix* uses miniscule tape splices selected by chance operations from 500-600 sources. Sounds do not last long enough to be identified as a source or as a soundscape. (Kahn 113) His *Imaginary Landscapes* series uses different sources for each piece; #3 is scored for twelve AM radios, with two performers per radio, one on loudness and one on frequency. His ideas about integrating unadulterated real sound stayed in the concert hall but did not get as far as his taped works. However, his insistence that the soundscape be considered musical, and his denial of the ego of the composer, are seminal concepts in phonography.

What we are hearing if we are just quiet
Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

Dale Lloyd has been a constant figure in the phonography scene. His record label, *And/OAR*, specializes in environmental recordings, and released the *phonography.org* compilations. His 1998 piece *Ferry Whistlers* is a field recording of a ferry pulling into a dock. This piece embodies the Cagean aesthetic in several ways. It embraces the randomness of the natural soundscape in its selection: Lloyd was particularly interested in the inexplicable screeching sound that occurs while the ferry pulls in and the crowd mills around. This creates its own rhythmic and tonal figure, itself abstracted from its sound source, as something not created by the composer. It is egoless in that while listening it is impossible to identify whom the recordist is; the crowd does not address him and it is difficult to get a sense of what his intention is in being there, other than recording.

3. Aesthetic realism

And to think that it is the sun itself, this time introduced as the all-powerful agent of a completely new art, which produces these incredible works. This time, it is no longer the uncertain, distant regard of man that discovers shadow and light, it's no longer his trembling hand that reproduces the changeable scene of this world, transmitted through empty space, onto an unstable paper.

Janin, Jules. "La description du daguérotype."

The first successful photograph was taken in 1826, by Nicephore Niépce, and required an eight-hour exposure. Louis Daguerre perfected the process, learning how to fix the images with salt, and helped develop the technology that made it a mass medium. His announcement that “requires no knowledge of drawing....” and that “anyone may succeed.... and perform as well as the author of the invention” was taken to be sinister by visual artists, who predicted that this novelty would not just threaten their medium but in fact kill it. Pinson said of these arguments

...the daguerreotype reduces representation to simple identity, or "accuracy itself, completely physical and material." Although a painter may similarly aim at the imitation of objects... that painting also includes expression through the artist's *faire*, or handling, and the painting's "mode," or style. The daguerreotype, on the other hand, can achieve imitation only. (9-10)

Obviously, photography was not immediately accepted as a creative medium, though it quickly overtook painting in the field of portraiture. Early attempts at fine art photography were,

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

by comparison, relatively rare. The medium of photography was originally seen as a novelty only, existing as documentation but not as a creative medium. (Sterling) Phonography can be questioned in the same way that visual artists questioned photography around the time of its inception: what talents are needed to make a recording? Where do we hear the hand of the artist? What is it that is creative about a recording? What is it that is related to previous sound-recording media like music, and what is it that is different?

Sterling also discusses phonography in the context of its relationship to photography. He points out that photography was initially seen as a tool for analysis or documentation, and that when it was employed creatively, the photographic aesthetic emulated that of painting, the precedential two-dimensional medium. Eventually photography's faithful representation of its subjects acquired its own aesthetic, "preoccupied with more abstract and formal considerations." (Sterling) Pinson refers to the acquired aesthetic of realism as "representational illusion (as opposed to the willed representation of painting)". (2)

Photography became noted as a creative medium in its own right when audiences recognized that, while the machine took the picture, the artist was involved in every other step of the creative process. Decisions have to be made by the artist about what is included and what is excluded in the frame, what type of exposure is needed, the size of the print and on what type of paper, and how the work is to be displayed. The audience is confronted with aesthetic appreciation for what Bell refers to as "significant form", the quality that distinguishes what is art from what is not.

There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist... Only one answer seems possible - significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. (Bell 2)

Phonography does function very differently from photography. Photographs are framed: the barrier between them and the world of the audience is made very clear. The photograph is inaccessible to the audience once out of sight. In contrast, playback of a field recording can affect an audience very differently than the viewing of a photograph. A field recording is present when you turn away from its sound source; will not be left behind when you leave the room.¹

Aaron Ximm, who identifies himself as the Quiet American in his phonographic work, began creating phonographic pieces after his trip to Thailand. While there, he made hours and hours of sound recordings on a Minidisc recorder. His intention is not to present the material as a documentary, in which there is a specific narrative; or as an anthropological document, in which we learn about another culture. The Quiet American's field recordings of Thailand let us experience the beauty of another culture's soundscape, framed by the decisions of the Quiet American as to what to record and how to record it. In this he echoes the Realist photographers, who use framing and a love for the images around them to create memorable pieces.

1

Unlike a photograph, a high-quality field recording can deceive the listener into thinking that it is attached to a real sound-source. This ties into Schafer's ideas about schizophonia and how hearing artificial sound can be detrimental. (Schafer 90-91) See section 1. Acoustic ecology.

4. The readymade

Duchamp asserts the esthetic interpretation of everything. Esthetic perception is not tied to the art-context — it has its origin and its justification in the observer, and can be applied to arbitrary material.

Remko Scha, “Readymades, Artificial Art, New Media”

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp’s piece *Fountain* was shown at the New York Society of Independent Artists exhibition. *Fountain*, anonymously submitted by Duchamp as R. Mutt (he never did admit to having created it), was a urinal perched on its side. It was a calculated, direct attack on the relationship of the artist to his creation, by suggesting that the act of the selection of an art object was on an equal footing with the act of generation. Duchamp called such an object a readymade, an art object that is perfect as it is when put in the proper context. From the article generally accepted to have been written by Duchamp in the magazine *The Blind Man*:

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under new title and point of view-created a new thought for that object.

His concept of the readymade defied traditional expectations of art. The artist became an individual whose perception of his surroundings, and selection of objects in them, became equal to the creative act.

The phonographic work behaves like a readymade. Like Duchamp and the readymade, a phonographer creates through selection only, and makes it into art by changing the context:

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

rather than setting a recording of the ocean by the ocean, it is set in a broadcast context, or as a CD release. In his article on the phonography.org web site, Sterling refers to an attempt to “discover rather than invent.” By this he means that the phonographer will choose the location and equipment. Once the recording situation is set up, the phonographer performs only very minimal modification to the recorded material. Duchamp said of this deliberate detachment that

It is very difficult to choose an object, because after a few weeks you start to like it or to hate it. You must approach a thing with indifference, as if you have no esthetic emotion.

The choice of ready-mades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the complete absence of good or bad taste. (Scha 3)

People new to the medium can stumble over the creator/creation relationship in phonography, like that of Duchamp’s *Fountain*, as dubious. It helps to consider the relationship between the phonographer and his creation as the relationship to the photographer and his creation. The aesthetics of discovery or capture are the most interesting part of the medium. In photography, the viewer is presented with visual information captured by the artist. Phonography is similar: the listener is presented with audible information captured by the artist. The presentation of the information in the context of art is what gives the audience the opportunity to appreciate it as such.

Sound artist/composer Christopher DeLaurenti has worked with field recordings for a number of years. His 2003 piece *Two Secret Wars* was released on the anniversary of the November 30, 1999 World Trade Organization riot in Seattle. *Two Secret Wars* combines recordings of Seattle police radio from the WTO riots with recordings from American snipers in Iraq. His intention is not like that of Duchamp’s *Fountain*: Duchamp hoped to make a point

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

about the nature of art as well as offend by introducing an urinal into a gallery. DeLaurenti's point is to expose to the listener the callous indifference of the occupying forces in Iraq and compare it to the callous indifference of the Seattle police force during the WTO riots. Duchamp and DeLaurenti both do this by using material that they did not create (in the traditionally generative sense of creation), but had instead found a context in which the material could be understood differently.

5. Magnification of the ‘small sound’

The air, you see, is filled with sounds that are inaudible, but that become audible if we have receiving sets... There were ordinary radios, there were Geiger counters to collect cosmic things, there were radios to pick up what the police were saying, there were telephone lines open to different parts of the city. There were as many different ways of receiving vibrations and making them audible as we could grasp with the techniques at hand.

Antonin Artaud, “No More Masterpieces”

Another part of the phonographic aesthetic regards the insight that a recording can give the listener through technology. The ability to exponentially amplify a very quiet sound can provide a listener with the ability to hear sounds that the ear cannot. Equipment like hydrophones (water microphones) and contact microphones (sensitive to vibration rather than sound pressure) take us to places that the listener cannot go unassisted. Listening provides an insight into the world through recontextualization of the sound in the same way that a readymade in a gallery provides a different insight into that object’s form.

Iannis Xenakis, composer, mathematician, and architect, created some of the very innovative works that preceded phonography. His 1958 piece, *Concret P-H*, was created with the almost inaudible “discharge of smoking charcoal” (Brody). The sound was amplified to an extreme magnitude, then copied onto innumerable small pieces of tape, rearranged, and mixed together. Xenakis said of working with these small sounds “There is usually no electronic alteration of the

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

original sound, since an operation such as filtering¹ diminishes the richness of a sound.” This resistance to using processing to color sound preceded phonography by fifty years. He resisted processing a sound, not due to the goal of presenting his material purely, but because it diminished the harmonic content of the sounds. *Concret P-H* was presented in the Phillips Pavilion (of which Xenakis was also the architect) at the 1958 Brussels World Fair, over four hundred loudspeakers.

One of the most interesting takes on the idea of magnification in contemporary phonography is that of Toby Paddock. Paddock has worked with recording electromagnetic fields instead of sound pressure variances. He has made magnetic pickup coils and uses them instead of conventional microphones. Paddock’s work reveals a completely alien universe inaudible to the unaided ear. In it automobiles are quiet, except for the alternator; the low buzz created by power lines is constantly present like a bad smell, and walking past a breaker box is like walking past a furnace, completely overwhelming. His piece *Lightning bits* documents the electromagnetic disturbance created by lightning. We normally associate the sound of lightning with deafening thunder; to a magnetic pickup the electro-static discharge of lightning is more like the noise of an irregularly skipping record. Paddock uses technology to magnify the hidden sounds that are normally unavailable to the listener, revealing a hidden world.

¹ Also known as equalization, or selective adjustment of frequency balance.

6. *Musique concrète*

"My past experience was not to 'meddle' with the material, but use my concentration as a guide to what might transpire. I mentioned this to Stockhausen once when he had asked me what my secret was. 'I don't push the sounds around.' Stockhausen mulled this over, and asked: 'Not even a little bit?'" (Morton Feldman)

Liner notes to Morton Feldman's *Last Pieces for piano*

The work of the *musique concrète* school preceded phonography, and is worth looking at it because phonography is a reaction to it. *Musique concrète* uses recorded sounds as a source for editing and processing into compositions. It began after WWII, when German magnetic tape technology became more widely available. Pierre Schaeffer, seen as a leading member of the movement, was a founding member of the GRM studios in Paris. At the GRM studios he was among several *musique concrète* artists that worked with sound recordings. (Magnusson 18) Contrary to the Cagean aesthetic, the recordings were used in small bits to create larger structures, as paint is used in a palette rather than being used as a dictatorial element. Schaeffer's idea of the *objet sonore*

the conception of a recorded sound as something with own entity by itself, independent of its source (Lopez 7)

is a key concept in *musique concrète*, the use of sound as abstracted material rather than contextual information. Schaeffer rejected one of his first experiments, *Etude aux chemins de fer*,

on the basis that the sounds were too recognizable. That rejection reveals his intention as artist to control the sounds rather than let them control the piece. (Kahn 110)

Francisco Lopez' contemporary work uses an aesthetic similar to Schaffer's. His process, making new contexts for treated sounds, is rooted in the tradition of *musique concrète*. He refers to himself as a Schafferian (as in Pierre) not Schaferian (as in R. Murray), eschewing the context generated by his sounds for that of a context created by his will. Lopez is a proponent of what he calls 'absolute music' or music without context. He uses field recordings as primary sources for his compositions. Of the relationship between the sound and its source he says

There can only be a documentary or communicative reason to keep the cause-object relationship in the work with soundscapes, never an artistic / musical one. Actually, I am convinced that the more this relationship is kept, the less musical the work will be... It can obviously close doors in the experiential description of sounds and their sources, but it opens new doors of artistic creation; to me, the latter are much more essential and relevant to the human condition than the former. (10)

Phonography's aesthetic is a direct response to the Schafferian idea of removal from context. In listening to a phonographic work, we hear what happened when the recording was made, rather than what happened when the artist worked with the recording as a material.

Many contemporary artists refer to their *musique concrète* as acousmatic music, which refers to "sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause." This idea has been extended by sound artists to describe the schizophrenic technique, of deliberately creating a disassociation between the sounds themselves and their sources. The listener, confronted with such a piece, cannot identify the source of the sound. Schaeffer referred to the opposite as direct sound, Chion

What we are hearing if we are just quiet
Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

preferring visualized sound: both refer to a sound that is associated with a visual source.

(Chion 71-72)

Bob Ostertag is a contemporary sound artist whose work covers a wide variety of methods, but to some extent all incorporate sounds that have been manipulated. He was an early adopter of digital audio technology, and used the same sampling technology¹ embraced by the first hip-hop and dance music producers. His piece *Sooner or later* uses as a source a recording made in the 1980s, of a Salvadoran boy digging his father's grave. As the recording is repeated, different sounds such as the shovel hitting dirt, a fly, and the boy's weeping are emphasized through electronic processing. In *Sooner or later*, Ostertag creates a grueling moment that cannot be ignored. Through the editing and processing of the sounds, treating them as palette rather than the untouchable phonographic object, we live back the event, again and again, mercilessly focused on all aspects of the moment. It is a piece that is extremely effective, and very difficult to forget.

¹ A sampler is a device that will let you record sound, edit and process it, and play it back on a conventional musical keyboard.

What we are hearing if we are just quiet
Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

Conclusion

A sound occurs. And is Heard. But by which person? From which culture? In what mental state? What physical state? What psychic space? With what intellectual knowledge? Which past experiences? What age? From which gender?

Hildegard Westerkamp, "Listening to the Listening"

We can see that phonography, the presentation of field recordings as art, is related to the acoustic ecology movement in that it addresses issues of our natural and industrial soundscapes, by putting them in a context where the audience listens in a new way. Bernie Krause's work calls attention to the changes that have happened to our soundscape as documentation. The Cagean aesthetic is also felt in phonography in its non-determinacy. It is not a medium in which the artist can exert complete control; the artist can only document what is happening at that time, surrendering some of the decision-making process. Dale Lloyd's recordings deny the presence of the phonographer/listener as creator and act only as invisible documentarian. Phonography echoes the Aesthetic realism movement in its almost dry presentation of events that occurred in a particular time and place. The Quiet American's Thailand recording series portrays life there at a particular time and place, with no objective other than the presentation of what happened. Duchamp's readymade illustrates the potential for anything to be an art object if placed in the right context. Christopher DeLaurenti's *Two Secret Wars* echoes the readymade directly by presenting found field recordings in a creative context. The use of small sounds in phonography serves to present a hidden world to the listener. Toby Paddock uses interesting homemade

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

technology to show us a world we can never really see or hear unaided, that of electrostatic discharge and magnetic fields. The *musique concrète* aesthetic is contrary to phonography, and is referred to here to look at another perspective on the use of recordings as art. *Musique concrète* is all about determinism: sound events are removed from their original time frame or order and are resequenced and processed to fit the will of the composer. In *Sooner or later* Bob Ostertag controls the time-flow of events through editing, and their sound by processing, in order to call attention to a political situation.

This thesis is only the beginning of an investigation of phonography. We've looked at the conceptual roots of phonography, and how several artists use those ideas in their work. What remains is to see what new ideas have developed from these roots and what will develop from phonography.

Phonography is also evolving in the way that its audience considers the work. The example of Marcel Duchamp becomes a pertinent analogy again, this time from the perspective of the audience. *Fountain* is still an object of derision, or seen as evidence of the inherent fraud of contemporary art, to those who are unsympathetic or disinterested in the contemporary art tradition. Photography, on the other hand, is a different example of how strictly documentative information, presented in the proper context, can gain value to an audience as an art object. Phonography is a logical conclusion to both the idea of the readymade and the idea of the photographic document as an art object; their audiences and their critics immediately accepted neither medium.

Expecting an uninitiated audience to listen to phonography not as music, or as documentation, or as 'television without the picture,' but as something worth hearing as itself, is

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

a challenge that the medium faces. Getting the audience to attend events is difficult enough, due in part to confusion on the part of the press (and often the promoter) as to whether phonography events should be listed as Fine Art, or Music, or Performance. Many phonographers are content to have their work received by the existing community and its supporters, but it is likely that the medium will not survive without a wider acknowledgement.

Despite that risk, the artists continue making work as phonographers and presenting it to the public and one another. As they do, an aesthetic continues to develop, derived from tradition but forged through practice and invention into something new. Phonography may never become a medium that the mainstream audience becomes familiar with. However, due to the amount of documentation in the form of recordings and correspondence, it seems very unlikely that it could be forgotten.

What we are hearing if we are just quiet

Dr. Nancy Schaeffer

Alex Keller

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What we are hearing if we are just quiet
Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

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Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

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Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

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Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

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Dr. Nancy Schaeffer
Alex Keller

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