

Thinking a sonic world

Antoine Chessex, 2017

*«Music should not be understood,
it should be listened to»¹*

Music could be defined as sounds that are heard through the vibration of the air and all the social, historical, political and cultural dimensions resulting from the act of listening. Thousands of frogs singing in a swamp in Thailand, the white noise produced by waves crushing violently onto rocks at the sea side, a metropolis at rush hour and its swarms of random textures, a volcano erupting generating masses of infra sounds or a group of humans performing furiously in a basement. All these sonic examples are making the air vibrate and result in specific textures that can be perceived as music.

When speaking about sound or music, categories might be troublesome. Music and Sound are utterly transversal and it might be problematic to lock them into any compartments or genres. Somehow, the works of Nina Simone, Thelonious Monk or John Coltrane resonates infinitely with the sound worlds of Iannis Xenakis, Pauline Oliveiros, Eliane Radigue or Maryanne Amacher but also with the radical experimentations of Whitehouse, Incapacitants or Darkthrone and all the extraordinary textures to be found within the biodiversity worldwide. As a matter of fact, reducing music to stylistic categories implies to reduce the whole scope of possibilities that result from the very act of listening.

It seems relevant to encourage the possibility of listening to the world in an abstract, doubtful and imaginative way going beyond what is usually considered «music» which, from a mainstream western-centric perspective, often responds to well-tempered melodies and a limited perception of regular rhythm. Without of course excluding the sounds that would respond to the above-mentioned criteria, it might be important to take into consideration all sonic phenomena and to perceive them in their singularities without hierarchisation.

This capacity to listen to the world often implies to perceive noises in their significance and as a stimulus for auditory imagination. As Jonathan Sterne has it «*a robust sonic imagination is not that different from good musicianship*»². Sonic imagination might be a way to reflect the production of subjectivity from the perspective of the ears. Douglas Kahn explains in the first words of his seminal book «Noise, Water & Meat» published in 1999: «*Sound saturates the arts of this century; and its*

¹ Scherchen, Hermann in Ferrari, Luc: Les Grandes Répétitions, Paris: INA, 2010.

² Sterne, Jonathan: The Sound Studies Reader, London & New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 6.

importance becomes evident if we can hear past the presumption of mute visibility within art history, past the matter of music that excludes references to the world, past the voice that is already its own source of existence, past the phonetic task-mastering of writing, and past what we can see as hearing»³. As a matter of fact, thinking sonically implies to reach way beyond the purely musical perception of sound and relativizes the division of musical genres. Musical categories seem indeed to happen very often within institutional scenes and also inside specific underground niches focused on self-defining a delimited terrain and sometimes excluding what is happening outside the own *terra cognita*. This stylistic separation of musical genres has also been deeply connected with the necessity of creating specific music markets on the one hand, and on the other, with the possibility of the social identification for a(n) (artistic) subject with a particular scene.

The 20th century produced an immense amount of challenging sonic practices developed in the margins that went completely above and beyond specific musical genres. There has been a variety of avant-garde practices happening within the music field crossing the whole 20th century and ranging from Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noise* to the many different forms of improvised practices, *Musique Concrète* and other early electronics or electro-acoustic experimentations, extreme and adventurous rock, (black-)metal and (post-)punk uproars, traditional music from all around the world, radical notated contemporary music, industrial and Noise music, phonography and researches within the sound art territories as well as many other bizarre and hidden sonic experimentations that created altogether vast and manifold sonic fields still evolving today. These ground-breaking sonic adventures have made possible to consider "noise" as art, without any hierarchization of genres but by considering all sounds that are heard as part of the totality of a sonic world that is constantly changing.

Moreover, it seems also essential to overcome the purely anthropocentric sonic production and to listen to the non-human sonic world in all its fragility. The ecological awareness raised by specific field recordings made by sound artists around the world are documenting an endangered and seriously damaged planet through its soundscapes, like the rich textures of the ice in the arctic melting irrepressibly, or the sounds of many living species whose extinctions are a consequence of destructive human activities. Thinking the sonic world implies indeed to address the human/non-human articulations as well as asking whose voices are heard and whose aren't. Thinking and listening to the sonic world seems therefore a central component for ecological sensibility and actions in the age of the sixth mass extinction allowing a potentiality of a possible attunement to the natural world and its biodiversity.

On yet another level, and returning to the sounds of humans, the manifold dimensions of the global

³ Kahn, Douglas: *Noise, Water, Meat*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999, p. 2.

musical world today create a great variety of niches and marginal scenes mixing different forms of adventurous sonic practices. Such practices also often go beyond musical genres and at times raise questions and address problems around queer, post-colonial, gender issues, inequities or DIY aesthetics. In other words, the global sonic world reflects existence through the complexity of sound.⁴ So called *Sound Studies* have been established as an academic discipline that permitted to raise numerous relevant questions addressing sonic production and reception and the many different ways of «*thinking sonically*» as Jonathan Sterne has it: «*Sound studies is the name for the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival. By analysing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world. It reaches across registers, moments and spaces, and it thinks across disciplines and traditions, some that have long considered sound, and some that have not done so until recently*»⁵. Indeed, the vast problematic around sound shouldn't only be addressed by musicians but, in order to gain varied perspectives on these matters, by many different disciplines such as visual art, philosophy, anthropology, history, cultural studies, architecture, acoustics, ecology, cinema studies and so on and so forth. One of the most interesting possibilities of Sound Studies is the *trans*-and *inter*-disciplinary qualities that constitutes its very essence. But even if established academically, researches and questions around sound should also be able to look outside of the academic milieu, to discover the multitude of marginal practices that take place on the field, revealing unheard voices concerned with the practices of sound. Many answers to manifold questions around the sonic world are indeed not only to be found within academic circles, but also in the shadowy fields of the hidden margins of the world. It seems therefore important to encourage an open approach to sound and to the development of multiple subjective ways of listening to the sonic world. As an alternative to the hegemony of visibility, it might be relevant to address and deconstruct the questions of listening on the social, cultural, historical, political, perceptual and philosophical levels and to further attempt to encourage discourses and positions around these matters.

On the other hand, it also seems appropriate to approach the practices of sound and listening as something inexplicable, that is to say, by going beyond scientific rationality. Feeling the pure physicality of sound as an experience that could somehow be compared to the «*expérience limite*» of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot or the sheer liberation of the scream by Antonin Artaud. The perspective of the limit-experience would concretize the act of listening to (or performing) sound as an attempt to go beyond the threshold of possibility and intensity. «*I call experience the voyage to the*

⁴ For further insights about the global sound world, see the project initiated by Thomas Burkhalter and his collaborators: <https://norient.com/>. Accessed on 27.04.17.

⁵ Sterne, Jonathan: *The Sound Studies Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 2.

end of the possible of man»⁶ said Bataille. By considering the sonic from the perspective of the limit-experience, one might address the problematic of sound from a different viewpoint other than the scientific or the theoretical one. The limit-experience has also been described by Blanchot and Bataille as a way leading to de-subjectivation by breaking the subject from itself. When considering numerous marginal sonic practices that have developed radical experimentations, from the historical avant-garde to the most extreme ritualistic sonic violence of some noise music performer over the trance inducing states found in numerous traditional sonic practices around the world, one can discover that sound permits the access to different levels of consciousness, reaching for the outside, beyond words or above scientific rationality. Without of course eluding the relevance of the theoretical approach when dealing with sonic matters, it seems important to underline the importance of the «other» perspective, that is to say, situations where the vibration of the air triggers reactions that are not always scientifically explainable but often mysterious and sometimes beyond rational human understanding. A position that is full of doubts by trying to find a path in-between the purely scientific and the theoretical perspective while always leaving the door open for the abstract or inexplicable phenomena might be apropos when trying to deal with the sonic world. Furthermore, it also seems important to avoid a Eurocentric and/or anthropocentric perspective when dealing with these questions. Listening to the sonic world as a limit-experience might be a way to escape rationality by encouraging sonic imagination and poetic journeys through the very occurrence of sound.

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Zürich, May 2017

Published in Kritik! Eine Publikation als Ausstellung, ZHdK, 2017

Present version adapted in 2019.

⁶ "J'appelle expérience un voyage au bout du possible de l'homme" in Bataille, Georges: *L'expérience intérieure*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, 1954, p. 19 (translated from French by AC).