

Aaron Ximm

SOUND, ART, MUSIC?

SEARCHING FOR A PERSONAL AESTHETIC

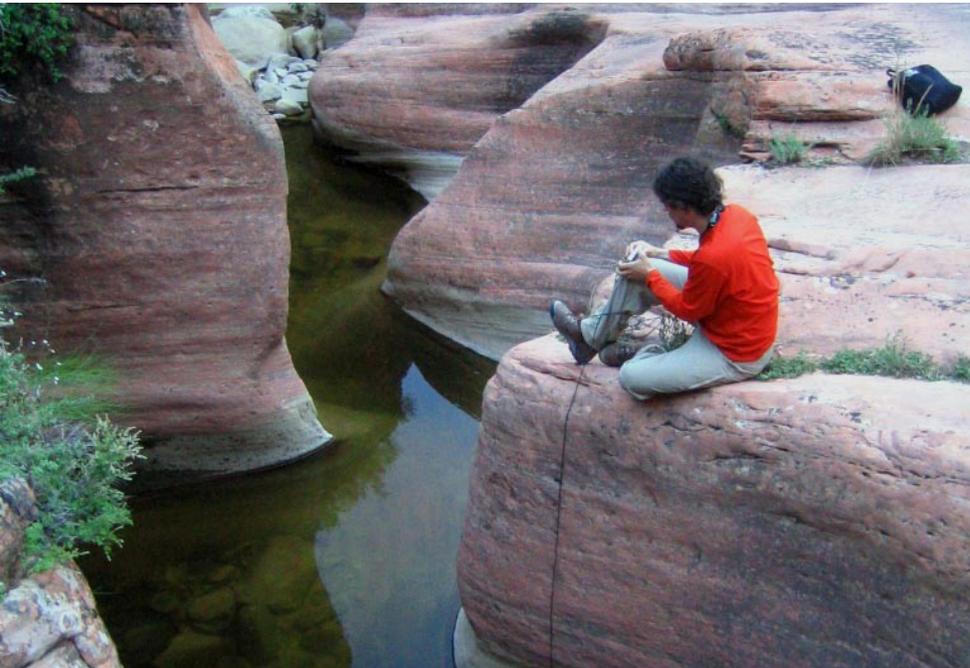


Photo: Bronwyn Ximm

Aaron Ximm is a San-Francisco-based field recordist and sound artist. He is best known for his composition, installation, and performance work as *Quiet American*, much of which can be found at quietamerican.org. From 2001 to 2005, Aaron curated the *Field Effects* concert series, which, like his own work, sought to showcase the quiet, fragile, and lovely side of sound art. Along with his wife Bronwyn, Aaron produces the occasionally popular *One Minute Vacation* podcast.

Conundrums

The more I know what I'm doing, the less certain I am of what I am.

The more I know where I am, the less certain I am of where to go.

What am I?

I don't know what I am or what I want to be.

I know what I do. I make field recordings and I work with them in different ways.

More specifically, I listen to sounds in the world and record some of them. I present my recordings unedited, I collage them, I manipulate them, and I arrange them to make compositions. I use them to make installations and sound sculpture. I perform with them, sometimes in novel ways.

I observe myself playing different roles when doing each of these things. In one role, I indulge a sentiment-

tal predilection for meticulously making lovely things. In another, I execute exercises in compositional theory without concern for the artifacts that result from rigid adherence to form. In another, I perform an ephemeral gesture that persists only through secondary documentation.

Though I describe all these things as “sound art,” I believe they come from different places. Using my own peculiar definitions, I consider some of my roles to be about the creation of “music,” some of “art” proper, and some of “sound art,” which is neither of those things as I understand them. I believe these things appear as modestly coherent and contiguous with each other as they do simply because I am their common origin.

When I say that I play different roles I mean, in addition to obvious differences in process and product, that I use different language to explain what I am doing, and that I think in terms appropriate to its discourse. In one role, I would say that I compose soundscapes. In another, that I am a phonographer. In another, that I am a composer and that I make music out of field recordings. In yet another, that I am an artist whose material is the sound endemic to particular places.

Perhaps I should start saying that I work in the sound arts, plural?

When asked to label myself, I simply say that I am a “sound artist.” It is the most broadly true of the obvious choices, but I have fixed on it mostly because of its inherent ambiguity: in my experience, “sound art” is used more as a catch-all term of convenience than to pick out specific practices and work. Like “electronic music,” “sound art” can mean anything from very slightly “experimental” popular music to a very highly experimental conceptual art installation or performance art piece. Even its practitioners habitually gloss over the very different things people are working with and toward under the rubric (perhaps because the community is still small enough, even in superset, that subdivision feels unhelpful).

Ambiguity has its advantages; for one, under its shelter I have been free to work in widely different ways without seeming to be entirely a dilettante. Yet using it I also have a lingering unease; the label “sound artist” comes (at least when unconsidered) with neither a clear theoretical framework nor a well-defined community of practice to support my growth as an artist.

If I could do it, I imagine it would be a relief to instead produce work within a single discourse and within a single community of practice. Choosing to become a “musician” (say) would suggest a form for my practice and constrain the forms my work might take. It would clarify who my community of peers was—and to whom, then, I should turn for a consensus valuation of my efforts. As a vetted member of a particular tradition, it would hopefully be easier to find an audience and a critical community. (It would lift the burden of having broad options; to be constrained is also to be focused.)

If I had trained professionally as a musician or as an artist, I would not have to make that choice; I would know what I was. Absent that training, such a commitment—to be one thing—is one I can’t convince myself to make yet.

The primary reasons for my hesitation are easy to identify:

I am a practitioner of an ill-defined hybrid art form like “sound art” partially because I am too catholic in my interests to let my work with sound, narrow as it already is, settle within a single of its component disciplines.

I am a modern multitasker: I have a short attention span, but I gain insight from unexpected analogies and triangulations when I swap projects.

I am susceptible to the gravity (or charisma) of other people. Especially when I am inspired by someone’s work, I absorb their ideas, interests, and assumptions. I empathize with whomever I am around and take on roles that befit the moment: sometimes I identify with (become) someone; sometimes I become the “other” against which they may be defined. Within its moment each identity appeals, but though most identities touch on truths about my own work and interests, none encompasses the range of things I am interested in (which otherwise seems so modest).

Yet I can’t blame social malleability for the fluctuating nature of my work, as most of it is done in isolation. Even when traveling with companions, I record alone. I compose alone. I perform alone. When working I am alone with my own conflicting instincts and inclinations, and it is those things that keep me ambivalating. (Of course, I am surrounded by puppets that persist as caricatures of whomever I have most recently read or listened to...)

And as I will discuss below, I also believe that there is an ambiguity inherent in field recordings (and hence in phonographic practice) that naturally leads me, when working with different recordings, to different ends.

My problem is not that I don't know any direction in which I would like to go with field recordings. I would characterize it the opposite way: I remain interested in (too?) many of the possibilities that I see for them.

This essay has its origin in my desire to know what I should be doing with myself. It is a recounting of my navel-gazing quest for self-definition.

This is not purely an exercise in ego satisfaction. As I will expand on below, I do believe there are consequences for not knowing where I am heading.

What I have been Doing

Most obviously, and unsurprisingly, my drift—between identities, between ways of working, between ways of thinking about working—means that my work is in flux. It refuses to settle into a “voice.”

To render this concretely, I would like to describe several recent projects of mine. In particular I would like to describe why I feel that each is situated in a different artistic discourse, though they are all based on field recordings.

Each project differs from the others not just in “sound” but in conception, methodology, and results. In one I believe I used recordings to make music, one to make “sound art,” and one to make “art”—I use those terms as I have come to define them.

Through such differences these projects recapitulate the changes in my thinking about sound as I better learned how the work I was doing fit (and did not fit) into a succession of artistic frameworks. They reveal the changes in my work as I grew more aware of myself as an artist working in a medium with its own multidimensional history. They document how both my “sophistication” and my uncertainty have grown over the years.

It is not for me to say whether any of the roles I have played—musician, sound artist, artist—is more noble or valuable than the others. But I do think it is reasonable to say that there is a philosophical evolution occurring

when I progress from thinking about sound as a musician, to thinking about it as a sound artist, to thinking about it as an artist. Each stage introduces undeniably a clarifying context for the concerns of the discipline that preceded it, and adds concerns of its own. This is the evolution I feel myself to have been making over the past ten years, and it is the one that I wish to recount here. Whether such an evolution is desirable or inevitable is another topic. (I realize evolution is a freighted term.)

Articulating these changes is my goal for this essay.

It bears saying that I don't believe my thoughts on these matters are particularly profound, subtle, or original, but they are mine. They are a mental shorthand I use, necessarily simplifying but also as true to my experience as I can make them.

Being specific to my experience, though, I ignore and elide over equally natural ways of working with sound (or in sound art) outside of my own experience—for example, within of the context of performance art, or body art (I am thinking of Daniel Menche), or sculpture, or architecture. I omit consideration of related practices like sound design, radio art, scientific and documen-

tary (e.g. nature) recording, and academic (traditional acoustic-ecological and acoustimatic) soundscape composition.

Similarly, I omit conundrums extending to related domains, e.g. my unresolved feelings about acoustic ecology. I omit orthogonal concerns such as the technologies and techniques (and their consequences) I apply in field recording, the different forms my work takes, and the different relationships it negotiates with its environment.

For that matter, I omit any real discussion of what I am interested in accomplishing as an artist, or why I believe art (of any kind) is the appropriate mechanism for me; I do not treat of (relatively) contemporary concerns such as the tenuous nature of my agency and the way that this discussion presupposes it and the existence of my rock-solid ego.

What I do instead is write as an autodidact, as I attempt to come to terms with my own changing thinking about the nature and value of what I do as an artist—in particular, as an artist working with field recordings.

Making Music

The first piece I would like to discuss is *Guantánamo Express*, a long-form composition commissioned by Matt Smith for a *Kunstradio* series he curated called “Radio Roadmovie.” The piece was broadcast last spring and recently posted on my website.

The piece is a forty-minute soundscape weaving many recordings I made in Cuba. All of the sound in the piece is either straight field recording or manipulations thereof; all of the sound was recorded either en route to or in the town of Guantánamo. The surface subject of the piece is the trip my wife and I took to the town in the company of two Cuban musicians, Jesús Ávila Gainza and his brother Julio, to visit their families.

The piece is structured as a series of vignettes, alternating between relatively naturalistic soundscapes, almost untreated recordings of the musicians (or members of their families) singing and performing, and overtly “composed” moments compressing many obviously manipulated recordings into a dense euphony. There is no explicit narrative arc as such, and no narration as in my previous long-form piece, *Annapurna: Memories in Sound*;

but a story can be inferred, and as in that piece, my wife and I are present as “characters,” as are the musicians the piece is both about and for.

I want to discuss *Guantánamo* because making it for me was a self-conscious exercise in the sort of impressionist “sound collage” I gravitated to when I began working with field recordings almost ten years ago. In a sense it was an intentional indulgence in my nostalgia for that sort of work.

I say “nostalgia” because while I will never tire of making such work, the sensibility behind it feels naive to me now, and perhaps artistically (if not technically) unambitious. In such work I indulge a love of frankly “musical” pleasures that I have, if not exactly come to view with suspicion, certainly come to identify with a sense of social and artistic conservatism and pursuit of the “merely” voluptuous. In such work there is a gratuitous display of craft and a love of purely sensory pleasures that I believe is out of fashion in the “serious” art world (if never the popular one).

Sound work of the type I call “musical” privileges the aspects of sound that are easiest to relate to, sometimes

at the expense of others that might be more significant by other metrics (what is unfashionable is to do so sans irony). In the language of my critics real and imagined, it is the very pleasures offered by such work that leave it susceptible to becoming (if mostly unintentionally) bourgeois, Orientalist, colonialist, and sentimental. (Some of these charges originate in my habit of working with field recordings made while traveling in other cultures, a topic to discuss elsewhere.)

Though I hope all my work poses serious questions, a work like this poses them quite quietly. What it does loudly is please. Even when on the surface esoteric or avant-garde, work like this is arguably “pop” at core.

Allow me to digress into a bit of relevant personal history.

From the beginning I have made music and called it “sound art.”

When I started making field recordings in the late '90s, I knew what I wanted to do with them in the abstract, but I had no idea how that would actually sound. I distinctly remember describing to Leonard Lombardo (whose microphones I use) that I intended to “compose”

with field recordings. What that meant in terms of process and where that would lead in terms of results, I had no idea. (I often work by committing to what feels like a winning concept, trusting that I will find something worthwhile in its execution.)

I had little context and no training for what I was doing when I began working with my recordings on a digital audio workstation, but luckily I did some things right. Having recognized that I worked well within constraints, I found a good one: to work with the recordings I made as a sole source material. (Making work about a place using only its recorded sounds still has a great philosophical appeal: as my old hero Walter Benjamin might have granted, I thereby work with something more like symbol than allegory.)

So constrained, I found my way forward by trial and error: I listened to one sound, to one sound looped, to sounds layered, to sounds processed in this way and that. Doors opened as I discovered what my tools could do; they closed according to what seemed the natural source of judgment: my ears. What pleased them I kept; what displeased them I discarded.

Doing so, I unwittingly adopted a second constraint I was not aware of immediately.

What do you suppose would please my ears? At the time I was mostly ignorant of the application of field recording in “real” music, by which you can guess I mean academic or “classical” music. I was effectively ignorant of *musique concrète* and its descendents, including “soundscape composition,” as it is known in acoustic ecology (and related) circles.

I was slightly less ignorant of the applications of field recording in real music, by which you can guess I mean the music that I and my friends listened to, most importantly the pop canon. I had noticed the snippets of sound used in *Atom Heart Mother* and in Depeche Mode (and most memorably, Slavek Kwi’s contribution to Laila Amezian’s *Initial*). Thanks to my older brother’s benevolent influence, my horizons had opened; I attended underground industrial noise concerts, and I heard Zoviet France and Nurse With Wound. I listened to whomever I could find that used field recordings in their work, toy.bizarre and then Francisco López.

Which brings me to a defining encounter I had with the latter. I doubt he remembers it, but I gave him a copy of my first album and he graciously offered feedback. Something he said almost in passing was that what I was making was really pop music.

How could my “sound collages” be pop music, I fretted; I had believed I was making sound art.

Yet he was correct. The aesthetic that drove the decisions I was making was the one that defined the music I’d listened to all my life. Listening to *Three Trains*, a track from that era that is still my most “popular” piece, I clearly hear the architecture (not to mention the timbres, harmonies, and beats) of the music I grew up with.

It is no surprise that I would seek first to please my ears. In music what survive are mostly variations on a stable core of euphony. Most people listen to what pleases their ears and bodies and the pre-conceptual emotional mind. What I get complimented on by people outside my own esoteric community—by normal people, that is—are my undeniably musical works. (I assume this is a universal experience for people who work in fields derided as “difficult listening.”)

I see no point in fighting this “euphonitropism,” but as there are other ways to work with sound, I find it helpful to define this one. I use “music” to mean sound that works without theory: sound that is rooted in universals that satisfy us at levels that precede culture. (Three-on-two, pentatonic scales—I wouldn’t hesitate to call these universal; I assume they are deeply defined by our own evolved embodied circumstances. Though I do think attention makes something art, I do not think attention will make anything music. If we ever meet aliens, I will be curious to learn what, if anything, they use for music, and what they think of ours.)

It is a pleasant surprise that despite the immense terrain already known to conventional music, innovation and discovery in “musical” sound art do not seem notably constrained—no more than one cuisine forecloses on another.

In *Guantánamo Express* much of what I would describe as “musical” is obviously so, partly because on one level the piece is a portrait of musicians. Most blatantly I include within it unmodified recordings of music in its conventional sense. Almost as obviously I construct euphonic passages by quoting musical sounds directly. I incorpo-

rate everyday sounds with musical properties such as trains and the clip-clop of passing horses. I construct rhythmical figures from interesting snippets of various recordings. And so on. (The results, their origins in field recordings notwithstanding, make sense as music to almost everyone.)

But I believe that the piece is also musical in ways that derive uniquely from the use of field recordings as a medium. In particular, I believe that there are aspects of arbitrary sounds and soundscapes—sound that until recently was dismissed as “noise” in the derogatory sense—that work on us at something very like the visceral level that traditional musical materials do, as directly that is—albeit through different mechanisms.

It is unsurprising that we should still be discovering compositional materials (and the forms that arise from them, etc.) that work without theory: our vocabulary has expanded into a dimension that was unavailable until recently, after all.

Composition is (tautologically) constrained by the range of sounds (and their properties) that we can produce, control, or affect, and by the limits of our ability to

transfer or encode (inscribe) those things. Liberated from (in fact, confounding) the requirement to encode (as in a score) or perform, recording technology magnifies the range of possible compositional elements—in my experience to results that surpass the possibilities thus far demonstrated by synthetic electronic music, which are after all limited to human ingenuity and patience. The lyrical way of saying this is that the world becomes an instrument.

Though field recordings extend the range of textures and timbres available to composers by virtue of the sonic complexity of the world that they document, it is through their intrinsic capacity to represent that field recordings most dramatically add to the musical vocabulary. When one works with a field recording, emotional (and to a lesser extent, structural) vectors may derive not only from its sonic qualities but also from the associations evoked by recognizable subjects.

If the representational qualities of field recordings are a contribution to the musical vocabulary, though, they remain merely musical qualities to the extent that they are pre-conceptual and pre-narrative—i.e. that they work on a purely associational emotional level (representation

does allow for culturally specific associations that constrain universality, of course). Though they may operate on us in novel ways, the outcome of those operations is familiar: familiar enough that there is even a commercial market for recordings that work on us in this (associational) way—I am thinking of \$2 supermarket collections featuring the sound of (often artificial) fires, rain, streams, forests, etc. A market, alas, larger than the one for the more “artistic” applications of field recordings.

As I will discuss below, the effects field recordings have at the conceptual or narrative level I would call extra-musical.

(Incidentally, as I will also mention below, a trope field recording composers—myself included—seem to commonly discover quickly is the compelling dissonance that results when the sound and significance of a recording are at odds with each other, e.g. as when a musically lovely sound is produced by a conceptually terrible thing. Because the location of this dissonance is beyond the simply associational and into the conceptual, I consider this to be a extra-musical effect: I consider it to be an artistic one. To bring up Francisco López again, I interpret his notion of the “absolute concrete” as, among

other things, a more confrontational and abstract variation on this theme: he presents us with the uncertain pleasure derived from field-recorded sound received ritually stripped of its capacity to signify and hence of almost all associational affect; he intentionally provokes us with almost-familiarity. In López's work of this type, I believe he uses sonic materials primarily to reemphasize that process of "dislocation"—and not, as it may seem, to simply study those denatured materials themselves; hence he crosses into what I would call sound art or beyond: simply to art.)

You will have noticed my recurrent use of the word "mere." So: what's wrong with making music with field recordings?

There is nothing wrong with making music: in making sound art that originates in the musical instinct and its habits, and that works first, mainly, or only, on a musical level. In fact, it pleases me greatly to discover new modes of making sound "work." And to repeat myself, it is a fact that the experimental forms general audiences respond to readily are the ones that are the least radical in their rejection of known pleasures—however doused in the rhetoric of rupture and re-appropriation they are.

What I want to avoid, however, is making music without the awareness that that is what I am doing, or with the pretense of calling it sound art simply because I am working with new materials. Likewise, I would rather not make sound art (especially, bad sound art) and claim that it is music.

So many of the overt trappings of sound art (field recording-based and otherwise) are derived and appropriated from (or imposed by) the world of music that it remains hard for me to always tease them apart.

But I do believe that the concerns of many sound artists are genuinely distinct from those of musicians, even the ones making musical sound art. (As I will get to, it is certainly the case that the interests of the larger art world lie elsewhere these days.)

Working with sound to make music, I developed such concerns myself.

Making Sound Art

The second piece I would like to discuss is *Kagbeni Variations*, a two-part project completed in 2004. It

consists of an unedited twenty-minute recording and a collection of thirty-two “variations” I composed using that recording as my sole source material.

The source recording documents a festival celebrating the birth of the Buddha that my wife and I encountered on our honeymoon in the medieval town of Kagbeni, high in the Jomsom Valley in the Annapurna region of the Nepalese Himalayas. Instructions ask that the source recording be listened to at least once before the variations.

The titular “variations” are process-exercise compositions a few minutes long. Each “investigates” a short excerpt—typically a few seconds—from the source recording, disassembling it through one or more procedural editing mechanisms, which I carried out by hand. Most of the procedures I performed involved permutations on the conceit of looping (though none simply loops). Looping is a process I have a troubled relationship with, finding it seductively effective at recontextualizing field recordings but also terribly tired, in both my own and others’ work. This project is in one sense a record of an attempt to come to terms with looping, if temporarily.

I conceived and executed several hundred different strategies (recipes) for variations; the variations that together best illustrated the range of ideas I covered were reduced to a set of thirty-two, divided between two groups: simple variations, in which I applied only a single manipulative strategy, and complex variations, in which I combined two or more strategies.

For reasons that I will describe in a moment, a key criterion I used to select variations for the final set was that the collection taken together should support (ideally encourage) repeated listening; with this requirement in mind, I favored variations that were musical enough (in the sense described above) to hold the attention of the average listener.

Musicality was not itself the goal for this project, but it was a precondition for it. It was a “garden path,” intended to appeal to the listener and therefore distract her while I achieved a less obvious objective. (A similar motivation determined my choice of source recording in the first place: I chose something that would attract enough interest, as a “fascinating document of an exotic locale and event,” to stimulate interest in the project as a whole.)

Taken individually, each variation was intended to work on three levels. It was meant to reveal the complexity of and beauty latent in arbitrary moments of soundscape, to document the strengths and weakness of simple looping-like techniques for “excavating” sound recordings, and, almost as if as a side effect, to familiarize the listener’s ear with specific moments of the source recording through repeated exposure.

The latter, though inevitable, is actually the most important for my purposes. My intention was that (taken collectively) the variations alter the listener’s relationship to the source recording.

Because the variations obsessively repeat specific moments within the source recording, listeners should discover that the latter can no longer be heard naively as a monolithic recording. Instead, once the listener’s ear “learns” the variations, the source recording should be punctuated by regular moments of attention-catching familiarity—and because of the repetitive nature of the ritual documented and various recurring elements in the background soundscape, peppered with tantalizingly near-familiar moments as well.

Kagbeni is meant to demonstrate the premise that arbitrary moments of sound can become as familiar as conventional melodies through simple repetition—and ever-after reliably catch the attention of the ear, as melodies do. (Ear-worms can be made by brute force, in other words; or, “all the world’s a jingle.”)

(The original inspiration for this project was my own early experience manipulating field recordings; I found that working with recordings in my studio reliably altered my relationship to previously quotidian sounds. Encountering sound similar to what I was working with in the wild, my ear would instantly trip and I would snap into a state of high attention to what I was hearing. Even as I wrote this essay, I worked on a short track whose primary constituent recording contains a moment of incidental sound very similar to one in one of the *Kagbeni* variations; as if to prove my own point, every time I hear it, I am instantly reminded of the similar moment in the variation. I am sure this experience is familiar to anyone who has tried to learn to identify birdsongs from recordings.)

It is my hope that the listener comes to recognize that (and why) this has occurred. The listener’s experience of

her attention fixing more or less consciously on particular moments of sound, only to relax and drift until the next such fixation, is at the heart of the work—as is the listener’s experience of becoming self-conscious about this very pattern.

That experience is where I would locate the work; the sound is just the vehicle. That moment is the art; sound is just the enabling (if mandatory) medium.

I consider *Kagbeni Variations* to be one of my most accomplished works of “sound art” to date.

What makes it “sound art” for me is the role sound plays in the work: it is the relationship that its constituent sound has to the “place” I believe the essential artistic experience occurs (when it does). In this work sound is vehicle and source, but the primary artistic experience is one about sound, not (only) one (only) of it.

As I said above, I do think the piece is musical; I intended it to be, and it must be to succeed by my own terms. But it is musical while doing something I cannot help but think of as more-than: it is about something. It strives to articulate something in addition to its own sound

and their effects. For me, when sound is less simply itself than about itself—beyond the way music might be said to be “about” its own qualities or (those of) other music—it moves beyond the “merely” musical; it becomes (or at least acquires qualities of) “sound art.”

When I say “about,” I mean by demonstration as much as any means of signification. If *Kagbeni Variations* provokes the listener into a (more) self-conscious engagement with her own process of listening, it is not just doing something, it is demonstrating something. It is not about the musical pleasures found in the variations themselves, even though it is only on account of those pleasures that it succeeds; it is about the experience of those pleasures (and what that experience does to the listener).

Of course, the psychology (etc.) of the perception of sound is just one recurring concern—a central “topic,” if you will—of sound art.

Another is the way things sound (in both the active and passive senses): objects (including traditional instruments), people (the way sound is produced within and by the body), animals, plants, the places, spaces, events of the world.

Yet another concern is the way that sound can (and comes to) signify and act, in limited ways (soundmarks) or broad ways (as language, or as cues that shape our eco-socio-political-psycho-geographies). For example, much of the noise I see performed as sound art is “about” power, particularly control and domination—though in this case there is usually less thought than reaction, as far I can tell; I am sick of artists regurgitating the very unpleasant structures they allegedly critique.

And so on.

All of these are obsessions of phonography, of course, once it progresses beyond merely musical subjects and merely musical effects. Field recordings’ capacities for narrative—the representational aspect they have that goes beyond pre-conceptual associations—make them a natural instrument for sound art; phonography is, of course, the main avenue to exploring the sound of “events.” Work of mine that emphasizes this capacity is often described as cinematic. (In *Kagbeni*, I might say that the source recording is sound art itself in this sense: it is a cropped record of how a place and time in the world sounded, through my gear, from my positions, at a particular moment.)

Of course, most sound work (with field recordings and without) operates on more than one level. There is a fine fuzzy line between being interested in (and making work about) the musical qualities of sound, and simply using those qualities to make music.

But I would still go so far as to say that when sound work makes concerns such as these primary, when it is “about” sound in these ways, then it is sound art.

I’m aware that such a definition annexes work that would be described by its own creator as music, but I have found this distinction useful nonetheless; I might somewhat slyly suggest that what fails as music by music’s own traditional metrics could be situated instead as successful as sound art.

Extrapolating from this point, I believe that our terminology can and should evolve, if consensually, in precisely this direction. Sound art should be clearly defined as something distinct from music.

For one thing, many sound artists come from backgrounds (and speak languages) other than the musical; e.g. they come to sound through architecture, science, sculpture.

But ultimately the important thing is that such distinctions, especially those that are relatively easy to point to in the world, can be used to clarify the ways we use and engage with sound that are relatively new and distinct from older art forms. The point of this essay, after all, is that redefining and refining my terms has helped me understand real differences in how my peers and I work with sound. A broader adoption of such distinctions would encourage us to collectively evolve appropriate mechanisms for how sound art is presented, distributed, evaluated, discussed—even bought and sold.

As you might suspect, I'm not interested in the commonly espoused (in my experience) contrary position that phonography, that sound art, that all “organized sound,” is music. As far as I'm concerned, such a broadening of terminology is either tautological or false; such notions undermine our collective effort as sound artists to evolve new relationships to sound beyond the traditions of music. To call sound art music is as unhelpful as calling music art. (An instrumental definition of music as “that which musicians make and agree is music, within their own discourse,” though not as useful in my own thinking as the one I employ above, “sound that works,” is still better than one that annexes what I am calling sound art.)

Phonography—and since I'm being particular about terminology, perhaps I should clarify that I mean the making and presentation of essentially unedited field recordings, and not compositions made from them or manipulations thereof—occupies an intriguingly ambiguous position. To state the obvious, depending on its subject and the nature and context of its presentation, a field recording can be music, can be sound art, can be both, can be made into either, perhaps can be made neither.

As I mentioned, many of the recordings of mine that people respond to are what I would call quite musical—for example, my recording of donkey trains leaving Marpha, Nepal. Some of my own favorites include recordings that are quite unmusical, whose significance derives from what they mean, not from how they sound—for example, my recording of the Harichandra “burning ghat” in Varanasi. The difference in how I appreciate each of these types of recordings is the difference between musical phonography and phonography as sound art.

I have speculated that it is the potential to be (and become) both music and sound art within phonographs themselves that has encouraged me (more and less

consciously) to take different projects in different directions. I know for certain that this openness is what has encouraged me to continue working with field recordings as single-mindedly as I have.

Possibly this ambiguity at the heart of the practice of phonography helped lead me into my current existential confusion. If nothing else, I think it partially explains the conflicting ideas people in the phonographic community have voiced about what they are doing.

If such an ambiguity increased my confusion, though, it does not fully account for it. For the past few years I have been thinking a lot about yet a third potential in field recordings as well, which I believe is as yet largely unrealized: with field recordings one can make not just music, not just sound art, but art—unqualified by that diminutive “sound”—as well.

Making Art

The final piece I would like to discuss is a small but personally significant project I executed a few months ago while vacationing on the Mayan Riviera in southern Mexico.

Named *Flotsam Resonance #1*, the project is dedicated to and was inspired by Toshiya Tsunoda—specifically, by his recordings made from within tubs and bottles, such as those that appear on his Extract from *field recording archive #2*: The air vibration inside a hollow. These investigate the way objects “sound” in both the active and passive senses, within themselves and within their surroundings. (As such, they’re perfect examples of what I consider sound art proper.)

While in the Yucatan, my wife and I stayed at an “ecotel” in the *Sian Ka’an Biosphere Reserve* south of Tulum that is administered by the *Centro Ecológico Sian Ka’an* (CESiaK). The latter is a nonprofit responsible for the creation and expansion of the biosphere, and famous for its work protecting sea turtles. Most of that work is done on the coast’s long beaches, which while shockingly lovely are suffering: they are regularly inundated with trash floating in on the current—so much trash that our instinctive efforts to help, by collecting bags full of detritus, while appreciated, were worse than useless.

When we suggested that hotel guests could be encouraged to collect trash, the center’s director told us that this was a frequent suggestion, but that it was impracti-

cal not only because of the unrelenting tide of garbage washing ashore, but because there is no reliable trash collection system to disappear it; any trash that is collected just piles up.

I was intrigued to learn that the center has amassed a library of interesting trash, which indicates that it came not only from the obvious suspects—cruise ships regularly dumping waste overboard; the ill-managed growth up the coast at Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum—but from all over the world: from the U.S. of course, from South America, even from Australia, Asia and the Arabian Gulf. Hearing this, I was reminded of reports of floating “trash islands” as big as American states collecting in the open ocean.

Finding the beach freshly littered with new flotsam one morning, I made a pair of simultaneous field recordings as follows. The first was made by inserting the very small capsules of my *Core Sound HEB* microphones into two glass bottles that had washed up (an admission: I relocated one of them to achieve approximate human ear separation between the bottles). The second was a conventional near-binaural recording I made with my *Sonic Studios DSM* mics (which, as always, I wore on my head).

As I had hoped, the recording made within the bottles is quite interesting as a phonograph. While clearly audible and identifiable, the surf and wind I heard on the beach are strongly filtered by the shape and volume of each bottle, with the differences between the two producing an interesting contrast. The recording I made conventionally is interesting primarily as a contrasting document of how the beach sounded as I recorded it.

I intend to release this “art work” with a minimum of tinkering; I think it will be enough to present the two tracks as they are, contextualized by photos I took of the awesome array of flotsam washed up on an otherwise paradisiacal stretch of beach.

Despite its simple, even austere, component materials, I do not consider *Flotsam* a simple work. That it is so superficially simple is, in fact, a clue that the listener should consider it more closely. Though it sounds self-congratulatory to say, for me this piece was the equivalent of brush calligraphy: a deceptively minimal outcome made possible by years of rehearsal.

Formally, I believe *Flotsam* balances three aspects I habitually (in my outdated way) judge art on: its beauty

and craft, its subject and concept, and its significance within its (discursive) context.

So far, in discussing my definitions of music and sound art as they apply to working with field recordings, I've concentrated on the first two of those aspects. What makes this piece successful for me as art is not that it works on both of those levels but that it foregrounds the set of relationships between them—I might even say that the art in this piece simply is those relationships. What I like in particular is the way those relationships turn out to be something other than what they might initially be assumed to be when they are explicitly considered.

Flotsam is based on a premise: that the listener, when confronted with the unfortunate circumstances of its component recordings" making, will reconsider both their beauty as phonographs (which you will have to take at my word), and the significance of the (arguably) conceptually interesting strategy applied to make them. It is the almost alchemical operation of the piece's context on its more material aspects that makes me think of it as a successful work of art.

To wit: in light of *Flotsam's* context, I hope that the beauty of the recordings that constitute it will not so much be repealed as called into (moral?) question—made akin, if you will, to oil-slick rainbows on a puddle: lovely, but troubling in their implications.

I hope that the concept of making a recording inside a bottle becomes more interesting; in particular I hope the fact that each of the bottles in question is sea trash evokes (and deforms) the latent conceit of a message in a bottle such that unexpectedly a message is exactly what the recordings in the piece turn out to be—that they are understood to document not only the surf but also, additionally, the sound of a beach that has been littered.

I hope the inclusion of the conventional binaural recording will be understood to offer not just a baseline from which to compare the way bottles filter sound, but also a reminder of how the beach would (could) sound from any arbitrary place on it—if only some of those places, the other one documented, for example, had not been littered.

I gave my definition for sound art as sound about something—but most particularly, about its own qualities, its

own nature. Ultimately this piece is not about sound. It is not the recordings I made, taken on their own merit, that are at its core. What is most important in the work is not what the piece's sound itself is about, as either music or sound art.

Instead, I believe the artistic moment in *Flotsam* occurs in the dynamics at play between the piece's sound and their context, in particular in what I described far above as a type of dissonance. The piece is about (sonically documents) an object (a bottle) and a place (a beach); but an additional artistry occurs in the moment that those things are (to use a strong word) perverted by their context (the fact of them being beach trash).

To complete my crude system of classification, then, I would say that art in an unqualified sense occurs in this piece because its referential horizon extends beyond what is present in the piece itself (even more so because that extension is in this case concisely reflexive). *Flotsam* is about something beyond itself; it cannot be (fully) understood as long as it is analyzed only in terms of its immediate (e.g. sonic) characteristics. For me, this makes it a work of art that transcends, even as it is constructed from, sound. This is not a value claim but an observation.

With its subject matter thrown open beyond the confines of its own medium, work naturally takes on a different character. Confronting subjects beyond its own operation it may become more humble: it less often states or demonstrates than contemplates; it questions more often than it posits; it proposes more often than it claims. It may more often surprise. It may speak to a broader audience. This is my experience, both as a maker and as the audience for this kind of sound art.

(I find it provocative that the work I think of as the most artistically sophisticated is also the simplest in form and was the simplest to execute; that said, I do think it exhibits beauty as an exercise in its medium.)

Making Art?

To say that some sound art transcends its medium is not a value judgment. But I feel compelled to make a related one, about the relationship between the sound art and larger art worlds. Namely, that to the extent that sound art itself remains focused on (obsessed with) the properties of its own constituent medium, it remains "qualified" art. It limits itself to being behind the times, philosophically, and to what I would call a genre-ghetto,

practically. This is an observation I have made, not a principal of mine.

I defined sound art as I did partly because of how I have internalized the way that it is (often if subtly) set apart from what I would call art-world-art; my experience is that outside of the sound art community, which perceives no pejorative, work labeled “sound art” is often (if not always) in a sense also being labeled not-art. The implication is that if it were up to snuff, it would be simply art (with a capital “A”) that happens to make use of sound.

(This seems to be a contemporary risk run by all mediums that take themselves too seriously as mediums—I am thinking of painting, photography, almost everything I regularly encounter in museums and galleries oddly enough—and not uncommonly, by other art forms preceded by a qualifier such as “performance” and “land.” That said, there are uses that merely describe rather than diminish; and everything must be categorized of course...)

A historical reason for the genrefication of sound art I have alluded to already is that much of it is not only

produced but performed, distributed, evaluated, and written about as if it were music. Considered from the art world, music qua music is undeniably one of the “Others.” It is no surprise that sound works thus seem to sometimes overeagerly embrace alternate modes of presentation (sculpture and installation, particularly) to avoid being characterized as music, even when such presentation seems peripheral to the work’s essence. (I include here my own *Serendipity Machines*, which in the interests of being “show-able,” reify a concept that could probably be demonstrated in less sculptural ways.)

But more significant, I think, is that to the admittedly limited extent that I understand it, art-world art seems these days to most often locate the artistic experience intentionally outside of—often in spite of, or even in a hostile or provocative relation to—its medium, regardless of what that medium is. I encounter work that fetishizes craft in an ironic or suspect way, or celebrates a disregard for it, at least as often as I encounter the simple application of (indulgence in?) skill.

What I as an outsider see taken most seriously in the art world is work that relies on the cultural context of its creation—on deeply mutually-aware artists and

audiences (including critics and theorists)—for not only its interpretation but for its subject matter, even its materials. Work that is defined, in fact, by the relationship it strikes with that very dialog: the inflection it has towards its own cultural-historical context may be the essence of its style—often, is its essence, full stop.

When I am unaware of the specifics or even the nature of that dialog—as I often am—work like this can be unintelligible; when it is unintelligible it is not infrequently also unenjoyable. (I do not expect art to be enjoyable, but simple pleasures are all that is left when the complex ones—occasionally intentionally—elude and exclude me.) It can feel alternately arbitrary and over-determined, it can feel overly coy; I worry that when it is not obviously those things, it may be again, by being self-conscious in its refutation of them. When it lacks irony, I suspect that lack is itself ironic.

Attempting to locate the artistic moment in this kind of work, it seems that the message itself is the new medium—and that the medium is but a necessity.

Though there is sound work in that world, the majority of sound work I encounter does not intentionally

operate in this fashion. That is not the way most sound artists think.

This is not the artistic milieu I would have chosen.

I still make (musical) sound art because I am at heart what I like to call a “curmudgeon for lovely,” where “lovely” is just a flip way of summarizing the things we traditionally have looked to art to provide: the sublime, beauty, pathos, etc. I am still fascinated by the ways sound operates and by the ways I can sometimes provoke such things with it. In this I have what I think is a modernist (or even classical) set of concerns, quaintly antiquated in rarified circles, if ever ubiquitous in my broader culture. I am interested in intellectual sophistication and subtlety, but I do not have current tastes in how that sophistication is to be deployed.

A younger me would demand that I make my own milieu, go where my own instincts lead. Is not the cliché of (possibly pathological) artistic integrity to commit to one’s own vision, in dialog with other artists working in conceptually related territory only inasmuch as their work demands refutation or invites comment? Should interpretation and analysis not

be left to (probably posthumous) critics, collectors, and listeners?

But the me of today is aware that that if I indulge only my own instincts, I foreclose on dialog and its benefits: the possibility, if not the promise, of [re]education, growth, inspiration, even modest enlightenment. Pragmatically, I would also circumscribe the terrain in which my work might be noticed, let alone taken seriously.

And just as much as I am interested in the “lovely,” I am interested in participating in my culture intellectually and socially. I am drawn to concentrations of cultural capital; I would like to be privy to and to take part in the conversations in that capital’s capitals. (Alas, I am not unaware that this desire itself is romantic in a way that is embarrassing and probably out of vogue.)

Unless I want to wait for privileged “outsider” status, or to flourish only in subcultural circles, I must be conversant in—if not natively a speaker of—the cultural lingua franca of my day. To do so, in other words, I must make work that speaks that language.

A friend told me the value she most took from her MFA program was that she understood better what conversations were going on around her, and hence what her art was saying to other people.

I am old enough to know that I need to pay attention to what I am saying.

What am I Becoming?

I wrote above that I thought there were consequences for not knowing what I was becoming.

Labels matter when we talk about what we do with others, as I am doing now. The vocabulary I use to describe myself—musician, sound artist, or artist—implies the context in which my work was made and signals how I intend it to be interpreted.

Labels influence who might make time to listen to or think about the work I do. Over my life the language I define myself with will shape how I conceive of my work and how others receive it. It will determine what I become and what I will have offered. The labels I choose will define the work that I do.

Labels also matter because by accepting or rejecting them, I may help frame understanding of and debate around my work. The vocabulary that clusters around a given label establishes the terms under which the work I produce is marketed, sold, and—dare I say it—consumed. The wrong label could doom my work to trivialization and probable misinterpretation. Dare I say it, it could doom it to critical and commercial failure.

So which role? Which label? I remain conflicted.

There is no shame in working as a musician, or a sound artist, as opposed to an artist (capital “A”), but I don’t need to remind you how our culture assigns different value to each of these “modes of cultural production.”

I believe the young me is right that I should trust to instincts—but this old me has instincts that clash, conflicting imperatives in the hierarchy of my needs. My cerebellum wants to make art that strikes a grace note to the cultural Zeitgeist, but my ass just wants to make music that rocks.

I will probably continue to work in all the ways I have defined; for one thing, I conceptualize each aspect as

encapsulating the one before it, not replacing it. None is independent of, or in true hierarchical relationship to, the others; each merely moves further from the properties inherent in the work itself and into the context in which those properties are presented and interpreted.

And regardless of the label I espouse, I hope, of course, that my work partakes of (and balances) all my concerns, if in different measure at different times. I am more than at peace with this fate, I embrace it; I have always thought art should reward on many levels. (This is true of the work I discussed here: for example, there are aspects of *Guantánamo Express* I would describe as “artistic,” such as the fact that it was chosen as a subject for a major piece specifically because of the single-note association “Guantánamo” has for Americans—my intent was to provoke a self-awareness of the unfortunate way that the reality of Guantánamo as a place, with its own culture, has been almost completely obscured.)

In any event, the choice may ultimately not be mine. I am and will continue to be labeled by other people.

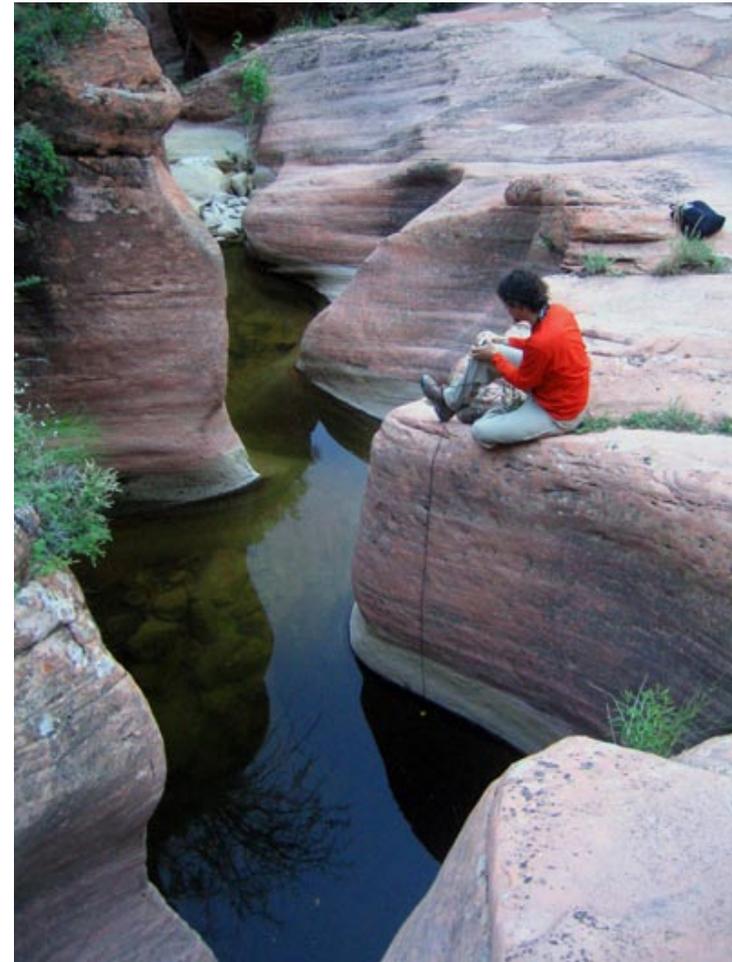
Where am I Going?

As I try to come to terms with (and come up with the terms for) what I am doing, I will keep wandering. I will keep working.

I work with documentary sound, so at least I am keeping a record: there are tacks on my mental map that mark what I've thought specific work to be, question marks that indicate where I thought of settling into a specific role, empty pin-pricks that show where I reconsidered old projects. I've made an erratic mess; I can imagine the frowning mentor I never had clucking, calipers in hand, as it becomes clear that with my scattershot efforts I have not settled within an acceptable radius. That I have no style and that I don't know what I am: that I am lost.

I can live with lost. I will endeavor to embrace it; I appreciate the symmetry between the fact that I spend my time documenting with sound the situation of being lost—and the fact that now as an artist working with that sound, I am lost again in a whole new way.

I just need to remember to stay honest about how lost I am.



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