

SONIC

LISTENING TO

NON-HUMAN

LIFE

URBANISM

edited by
&beyond collective
for Theatrum Mundi

SONIC

LISTENING TO

NON-HUMAN

LIFE

URBANISM

4 Preface
& beyond collective

6 Introduction ✱
John Bingham-Hall

12 The State of Things
Sara Rodrigues

14 Attuning to Disturbance ✱
Towards a multi-species sonic ecology
Nicola Di Croce

22 Lockdown Sonics ✱
A conversation
Matilde Meireles and Gascia Ouzounian

28 Critical Disturbance
Nastassja Simensky

30 The Background Buzz ✱
Listening to electrical substations
Juan Guillermo Dumay
and Ruth Oldham

36 Communities
of Electromagnetic Resistance ✱
More-than-human responses
to the wireless world
Matt Parker

44 Interspecies Intersections
Natasha Nicholson

★ A series of instruction scores
Listening With

46

Radio Gardening in Lagos
T-Shine-baba, Tushar Hathiramani,
Monaí de Paula Antunes, Niko
de Paula Lefort, Seetal Solanki

52

Your Mating Call Is Important To Us
The Sousrealists

54

Listening to Pigeons ★
A history of an avian typology
Ahmed bin Shabib
and **Rashid bin Shabib**

60

For an Ec(h)o-politics of Noise ★
The protest songs
of “invasive” parakeets
Nuno da Luz

68

When Parrots of Tehran Confess ★
A sonic relationship in three acts
Sepideh Karami and Elahe Karimnia

76

More Than Human Publics
John Bingham-Hall

78

Conclusion
Sonic urbanism(s) in practice
John Bingham-Hall

82

Contributors

86

Image and film credits

LOCKDOWN SONICS

A conversation

This discussion brings together Gascia Ouzounian and Matilde Meireles, collaborators on the research project *Sonorous Cities: Towards a Sonic Urbanism*. They discuss Meireles's *Sunnyside*, a composition that was recorded entirely in Meireles's home in Belfast during the initial Covid-19 lockdowns. *Sunnyside* is a reflection both on the under-appreciated sounds of domestic spaces, and on the relationship of domestic spaces to wider urban infrastructures. They further reflect on *Recomposing the City*, a research network founded in 2013 by Ouzounian and architect Sarah Lappin which has brought together numerous sound artists, architects and urbanists in examining questions around sound and urbanism.

Gascia Ouzounian Thank you for agreeing to have this conversation. I was grateful for the opportunity to talk about the work that we presented at the last *Theatrum Mundi* conference on sonic urbanism, which in my case was a paper called "Listening After Lockdown" and in your case was a live performance of one of your compositions, *Sunnyside*. Could I ask you to say a little bit about that work?

Matilde Meireles *Sunnyside* was initially released as a digital album by an experimental music label called *Cronica* in June 2020. It's a multi-layered project I developed using extended sound recording techniques in the initial Covid-19 lockdown in Northern Ireland between April and June 2020. To be more clear, by extended sound recording techniques, I mean extended listening periods and using microphones that allow me to explore liminal sounds or

sounds that lie outside our hearing range. So contact microphones, for example, which sense audio vibrations through contact with objects, or hydrophones, which are designed to capture underwater audio signals. I also used a wide-band receiver that captures and translates electromagnetic signals into audible frequencies. So these were the raw materials for the composition.

Gascia Is it correct to say that you made those recordings while you were in lockdown in Belfast, living on Sunnyside Street? So this was a domestic recording in an urban setting?

Matilde Yes, at that particular moment in time I was really interested in exploring what could happen when I started peeling back the layers of my domestic space. It felt like the world stopped in awe at the reduction of noise pollution outdoors and what started emerging from this. But little attention was actually being paid to domestic space. So I was really interested in exploring exhaustively the patterns and repetitions inside my house using sounds. And understanding what was happening sonically but that was not necessarily audible, so as to bring a slightly different perspective to what can be seen as a very quiet domestic space.

Gascia It's a very rich, sonically active and layered work, maybe surprisingly so, and some of that is because there are signals we cannot necessarily hear, for example electromagnetic signals when you're using the internet when everyone's online a lot more and doing video conferencing. You're translating those frequencies into sound, is that right?

Matilde Meireles and Gascia Ouzounian

Matilde All these movements and all these different types of communication suddenly became sonic. I guess an interesting aspect was how this really intensive recording process, instead of making me feel like space was shrinking, actually stretched the space and took me to other places. Listening to the sound of water running in a metal sink as I washed my hands made me think about the distribution of wealth, for example, and how other people might be experiencing the pandemic in a very different way from me. Or the absurd accumulation of electromagnetic frequencies reminded me of the growing dependency on technology and how the internet, in particular, was essential at this time. It was quite interesting how, on the one hand, all these aspects made me feel extremely isolated but, on the other, I also felt like I was part of a network, not just friends and family and work relations. My house was also a starting point to thinking of how it belongs in a larger network which is a pulsing, living thing like a city. And the city is, in turn, part of something larger and so on. All these elements are somehow interlinked.

Gascia There's a nice link there between *Sunnyside* and the talk I presented at the 2021 Sonic Urbanism conference, which was called "The Sonic Rewilding of Cities: Listening After Lockdown". This was a talk in which I was also looking at the phenomenon of the quieting of cities during lockdowns. There was a seismic shift, measured by seismometers, of decibel levels in cities being drastically lowered, as well as seismic vibrations in cities being drastically lowered. As anthropogenic noise was lessening, biophonic noises were increasing, particularly the sounds of

birds and other kinds of wildlife. This was because people were becoming less present in public urban spaces – not driving as much, not going to work and all of that – and animals took over a little bit in cities, especially in terms of their soundscapes.

Many people did recording projects all over the world, paying attention to animal sounds. I was particularly interested in the work of an English, Australia-based artist called Catherine Clover. She's been doing sound works with urban birds that are usually ignored, like pigeons and seagulls. For example, she has a pigeon choir in which people voice her transcriptions of pigeon songs, and they sing in public spaces like parks, where there are also pigeons making those kinds of sounds. It's like there were a common language between humans and non-humans. Looking at the work of an artist like that, she's really asking us to think deeply about what those bird songs, or bird calls, are encoding. She's really interested in the birds that were imported as part of the colonialist project in Australia and how their birdsongs influenced the birdsongs of native songbirds. Birdsong is a cultural trait, it's an acquired trait; it's not biologically innate. There's a sense in which these bird calls are encoding patterns of colonialist migration. I think we listen to birdsong aesthetically, but also there's politics in there and I think that's something we haven't broached very often in how we think about soundscapes.

Often soundscape is treated as an indexical thing: what are the sounds that are present in an environment? But I think a practice like Clover's, as well as a practice like yours, Matilde, really asks us to reflect in a relational and political way about what we're hearing and how those sounds

evolved. Why are they there? What are we hearing? What are we not hearing? What is the social, political, and economic basis of this?

Matilde You said something in your talk which really resonated with me about how we might hear cities in ways that matter and in a critical way.

Gascia When I asked that question I was riffing on the work of Donna Haraway, who asks how we can listen in ways that matter. She has this beautiful concept of the “phonocene” that she introduced as something that goes beyond the Anthropocene. She hears the phonocene in things as if the sounds of dying birds, for example, or the sounds of wildfires that are killing birds because they are forcing them to re-route their migration patterns. We can also hear the phonocene in those quieted soundscapes of pandemic as people disappear from public space. Historically, quietness has been held as a goal. In acoustic ecology, the aim has been to reduce man-made sounds. During Covid-19, we did have a reduction of anthropogenic noise, but it was because there was such extreme environmental degradation. So it’s not necessarily true that quiet or silencing is a marker of environmental health. In this case, it’s actually a sign of environmental degradation.

The aspect of *Sunnyside* that I really enjoyed was the revealing of urban infrastructures through engagement with sound, and I think that’s maybe a longer term project of yours. You did make one of my very favourite sound maps, and it’s much more than just a sound map. It’s a brilliant project called *X Marks the Spot*,

which you started in 2012 in Belfast. At that time I was also living in Belfast, and I left my apartment one morning and came across a telecommunications box down the street. Someone had pasted a big poster on it, which had different frequencies listed on it: 12Hz, 56Hz, 230Hz. Some of those numbers were bold, others less bold. It was like a visual indication of which of those frequencies were stronger, basically a spectral analysis that you had conducted of that telecommunications box, which turned out to be emitting a very rich drone, a hum. It was something I had never heard or noticed before. It’s one of those detritus

It’s not necessarily true that quiet or silencing is a marker of environmental health.

or junk sounds that you just live with. You had tagged various telecommunications boxes that were creating these drones. On those posters there were also QR codes, and people could use them to go to a website and then suggest other boxes for you to tag. I thought it was such a brilliant mapping of Belfast because it was giving value to an urban sound which is normally a throwaway sound. It was ascribing value to something that we don’t normally listen to.

Matilde I moved to Belfast in 2012 for my PhD at the Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen’s University Belfast, and part of the aim of the PhD was to enhance the potential of field recording as a tool to investigate urban transformation. I did not know the city and somehow I felt the

best way to get to know it was to design a participatory project that would propel me to discover other parts that I wouldn't otherwise go to. That's how *X Marks the Spot* emerged, as a kind of relational, augmented, playful sound-based project. Not all the telecommunications boxes produce a continuous sound or drone, just some, and this gave a game-like aspect to the project. The idea was to promote an experience of the city that was empirical and creative and not bound necessarily to the functional or hierarchical ways we usually walk through it.

By initiating a different way to engage with Belfast, routes could be designed to incorporate the drones as part of an experience of the city. The mapping process started with me, and then slowly a network of participants grew to include people I had never met: friends of friends and then friends of friends of friends and people who came across the posters – like you. It was a very slow mapping process and that was also an intended part of the project. The tagging process happened between 2013 and 2019 and, as you suggested, the project exists in different modes. I was thinking that people would not come across all of these different modes, which were designed in a way that they live independently of each other. So one is the poster, that you found, the other is the online archive that includes the documentation of the project and all the tagged locations. Then there's the offsite part of the project through which some of the materials I gathered during the mapping process are interpreted either by myself or other artists.

Gascia There are so many aspects of this project that have interesting resonances

if we're thinking about non-human sounds, more-than-human sounds, and really listening to the materiality of those telecommunications boxes. We often think of cities and soundscapes in connection to what sounds we want or don't want. At least, that's the public discourse around cities and soundscapes. It's typically related to noise mitigation. This project draws attention to the deeper urban ecologies that we inhabit, and we're a part of, whether we're aware of them or not. Something I really appreciate about your work is that it draws our attention to those things that we live with in our everyday lives, whether in our domestic space or this sound of urban infrastructure that we just don't notice. You draw attention to it in a way that is participatory, collaborative and welcoming. Normally, if you say the words "spectral analysis", my brain turns off, but actually your beautiful posters make it a very engaging and accessible idea.

Matilde Breaking down these really complex concepts and making them a little bit more tangible is an essential part of my work. And it's been wonderful to explore these aspects of urban soundscapes – their social, political and material bases – as part of our current collaboration in the Sonorous Cities research project and in our previous collaborations with *Recomposing the City*, which has been ongoing since 2013.

Gascia Yes, *Recomposing the City* is a continuing project. It's a research network that brings people together from the worlds of sound art, sound studies, urban studies and architecture. There's so much interest in sound in urban and public spaces but not many opportunities for those communities to intersect.

In the case of Sonorous Cities, we are particularly interested in the intersection of sound art, urbanism and critical spatial practices. These are spatial practices at the intersection of sound art, architecture, and urban design that are really engaging with the city in a critical way.

Something we're discovering is that soundscape is often treated as an object, as something that can be catalogued, recorded, preserved, conserved, especially in the context of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies. We're really trying to think of soundscape as a product: as a social, economic, cultural and political production. A lot of our work, whether it's in the capacity of creating artwork, doing an ethnographic study, or hosting workshops or design weeks, is really unpacking this idea of soundscape as social and cultural production. Therefore, instead of trying to determine which sounds comprise a soundscape, for example, we try to think critically about which sounds are present as well as which sounds are absent, and the underlying social, cultural and political reasons for their presence or absence. We're also interested in how different people experience and participate in urban soundscapes, particularly in dense cities that are undergoing change such as gentrification and urban renewal: do people feel included or excluded in these sonic environments? What contributes to a sense of acoustic community, acoustic belonging, or acoustic citizenship? How can sound artists, architects and urban designers think critically about these issues when engaging with sound in the urban sphere? * ●

* The SONCITIES project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 865032).

Score for extended listening

Direct your attention towards non-human sounds emanating from equipment and appliances in your living space. Notice how the sounds change as you turn to face different directions, move your head from side to side, or lie down on the floor.

Allow your listening to follow a particular sound, listening with the tones and rhythms of a fan, dishwasher, shower, radio or computer.

Place your phone near a powered speaker and listen to the crackling, humming electromagnetic tones that anticipate incoming messages.

Listen to the way the sounds of birds, traffic, construction, voices, come in from outside and as you step outside, listen as the sounds from your apartment fade away...

As you walk through the city, listen to the different voices, languages, patterns, and frequencies of human and non-human communication. Listen to the hum of telecommunications boxes, power lines. Listen speculatively to the inaudible/infrasonic, engaging your imagination to hear the normally unheard.

Let these forms of sound and listening lead your shifting trajectories through the city.

**Sonic Urbanism:
Listening to Non-Human Life**

A publication edited by &beyond collective
for Theatrum Mundi

Concept Theatrum Mundi
theatrum-mundi.org

Editing & design &beyond collective
Editors George Kafka with Sophie Lovell
Graphic design Diana Portela
Proofreading Fiona Shipwright,
Rob Wilson
andbeyondcollective.com

Contributors T-Shine-baba,
John Bingham-Hall, Nicola Di Croce,
Juan Guillermo Dumay, Tushar Hathiramani,
Sepideh Karami, Elahe Karimnia, Listening
With, Nuno da Luz, Matilde Meireles,
Natasha Nicholson, Ruth Oldham,
Gascia Ouzounian, Matt Parker, Monáí
de Paula Antunes, Niko de Paula Lefort,
Sara Rodrigues, Ahmed bin Shabib,
Rashid bin Shabib, Nastassja Simensky,
Seetal Solanki and The Sousrealists

Additional thanks to Arnaud Esquerre,
Lou-Atessa Marcellin, Marta Michalowska,
Océane Ragoucy, Justinien Tribillon
and the team at Gaité Lyrique

First edition 2021

Print run 600 copies

Printing & binding Greca, Artes Gráficas

Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-9161864-5-3

© The contributors for their texts and images

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are reserved, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in other ways and storage in data banks. For any kind of use, permission of the copyright holder must be obtained.

Reverberations in a new field

Listening to Non-Human Life is the third publication in the Sonic Urbanism series edited by &beyond collective for Theatrum Mundi. In this edition, contributors listen beyond the cacophony of human noise to hear the voices of non-human agents. From parrots and pigeons to crystals and electrical substations, the complex depth and variety of city soundscapes reveal new ways to understand life among urban ecologies.

The parallel digital publication can be read, heard and watched at sonic.city.

with

T-Shine-baba
John Bingham-Hall
Nicola Di Croce
Juan Guillermo Dumay
Tushar Hathiramani
Sepideh Karami
Elahe Karimnia
Listening With
Nuno da Luz
Matilde Meireles
Natasha Nicholson
Ruth Oldham
Gascia Ouzounian
Matt Parker
Monaí de Paula Antunes
Niko de Paula Lefort
Sara Rodrigues
Ahmed bin Shabib
Rashid bin Shabib
Nastassja Simensky
Seetal Solanki
The Sousrealists

&beyond
collective

THEATRUM
MUNDI



9 781916 186453