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Beyond the Soundscape: Art and Nature in Contemporary Phonography

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The 'blurring of the edges between music and environmental sounds is the most striking feature of twentieth century music', observes R Murray Schafer in a 1973 pamphlet.¹ This chapter, which will explore some of the contemporary ramifications of this remark, is occasioned by the proliferation of field recording activity in recent years – field recording is now commonly encountered both as a distinct artistic practice and as a component of experimental music and sound art.² I will consider the aesthetic status of field recording itself and the extent to which recordings of environmental sound show signs of the structuring or artefactual characteristics of an artwork, whether musical or not. My concern is not the tendency of contemporary music, under the distinct pressures exerted by Russolo, Schaefer, Cage or Schafer himself, to incorporate non-musical sound into its own processes. Rather I will focus on phonography itself, discussing works that are certainly artworks and that share much ground with some forms of experimental music.

This chapter will address the aural manifestations of a very old problem: the distinction between the world and its artistic representation. Schafer writes of the need to turn from the Romantic-expressivist paradigm that continues to guide the mainstream of Western art music, towards a view that treats 'the world as a

1 R. Murray Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (London, 2004), pp. 29–39, at p. 34. In a later version of this statement Schafer is more cautious, substituting 'may eventually prove to be' for 'is'. See his *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* [first published as *The Tuning of the World*] (Rochester, 1994 [1977]), p. 111.

2 I will generally use the term 'phonography' to distinguish the work I discuss. In this I am following Douglas Kahn's description of an activity that 'replicates the entire world of sound, including those sounds arising from other art forms and other media'. See 'Audio Art in the Deaf Century', in Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (eds), *Sound by Artists* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 301–24, at p. 324.

macrocosmic musical composition'.³ The founder of acoustic ecology and the inventor of the term 'soundscape' had an explicit hierarchy of sound in mind, counterposing the 'hi-fi' of the pre-industrial rural soundscape to the 'lo-fi' of the city street corner, where signal (good) and noise (bad) are indistinguishable.⁴ Citing Goethe on feeling 'the presence of the Almighty' as the poet presses his ear to the grass to hear the 'humming of the little world among the stalks', Schafer asserts that human hearing was infinitely more sophisticated in the pre-industrial past: '[f]rom the nearest details to the most distant horizon, the ears operated with seismographic delicacy. When men lived mostly in isolation or in small communities, sounds were uncrowded, surrounded by pools of stillness, and the shepherd, the woodsman and the farmer knew how to read them as changes of the environment.'⁵

While all of the artists I will be discussing have been influenced by soundscape theory, all take issue to at least some extent with Schafer's position on natural sound. I will suggest that the most adventurous contemporary phonography never seeks to present a quasi-photographic recovery of numinous natural sound in a fallen world.⁶ On the contrary, such work often involves or implies a far more complicated treatment of the relationship between art and the natural world.

The complexity of this relationship can be felt in the difficulties many have in demarcating different forms of phonographic, artistic and musical activity. In a brief contribution to the recent book *Autumn Leaves*, Tobias Fischer discusses the German Gruenrekorder label, noting the imprint's parallel series of field recordings and audio art.⁷ He suggests that the label has done much to bring down barriers between areas of activity that had hitherto remained distinct. In support of his argument, he cites the musician Jason Kahn's remark: 'More and more I wonder about what the point of organizing sound into music is. Just walking down the street sounds so great. Everywhere you go, it's already there.'⁸ It is hard to ignore the Cagean fingerprint here (as in so many contemporary discussions of sound, art and music): 'Walking down the street is now equivalent to reading *Finnegans Wake*',⁹ he asserted in a 1967 radio dialogue with Morton Feldman. Such rejections

3 Shafer, *Soundscape*, p. 5.

4 Schafer's definition of the term 'soundscape' covers both the 'sonic environment' and 'abstract constructions' such as soundscape compositions. See Schafer, *Soundscape*, pp. 274–5.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

6 On the relatively slow development, compared to art photography, of an 'artistic practice of phonography', see Kahn, 'Audio Art in the Deaf Century', pp. 301–3.

7 Gruenrekorder is one of a number of independent labels releasing field recordings in contexts that suggest an overlap with artistic or musical practices. Others include and/OAR (US), Winds Measure (US), Room::40 (Australia) and SIRR (Portugal).

8 Tobias Fischer, 'Gradual Changes: The Gruenrekorder Label', in Angus Carlyle (ed.), *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* (Paris, 2007), pp. 115–16, at p. 116.

9 John Cage and Morton Feldman, *Radio Happenings I–V*, trans. Gisela Gronemeyer (Köln: MusikTexte, 1993), p. 137. Available in streaming form at www.radiom.org, Part 2, at 9'50" (accessed 16 June 2008).

of the lines drawn between artwork and natural world are commonplace and contemporary phonography has flourished between the two. It is far from unusual now for musicians to work as sound artists, for phonographers to perform their work live and for sound artists to release CD versions of installations on labels normally associated with musical genres. Issues of definition are hotly disputed on mailing lists such as *soundasart*, with many accepting a version of Schafer's 'blurring of edges' as one of the givens of the contemporary aural arts.¹⁰

Writing against the grain of this consensual hybridity, Andy Hamilton, in the course of his recent book *Aesthetics & Music*, seeks to distinguish music from sound art and natural sound. Yet, while Hamilton argues strongly for a universal definition of music, he concedes that music is 'on a continuum with non-musical sounds arts, differing from them in the preponderance of tonal material'.¹¹ Hamilton's concept of a continuum is accepted by this chapter – I make no attempt to erect an impermeable barrier between phonography, sound art and music but I do believe that each term describes a distinct conceptual area.

In his recent book on sound art, Alan Licht discusses the relationship between the Land Art/Earthworks movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and early sound art, noting the sound component in Earthworks-influenced pieces by Bill Fontana, Walter Marchetti and Bruce Nauman. He particularly stresses the influence on this work of Robert Smithson's Non-site series, in which arrangements of sand, earth and rocks were installed in galleries.¹² Sound art, he argues, derives from a general turn in the 1960s away from the hypostasized artwork of Greenbergian modernism and towards an art that recognized the spectator's experience of the artwork in specific contexts. This controversy was also felt in debates on the role of experience and context in minimalist art in the 1960s, to which I will return towards the end of this chapter. In my view, these discussions about the relationship between world and artwork are developed in striking ways in the acoustic field by the phonographers whose works I discuss.

The thought of the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, which is informed by ecological concerns, is helpful in thinking these issues through with regard to the soundscape. His notion of the 'atmosphere' develops out of a phenomenological description of bodily awareness. 'Atmosphere is a kind of tuning, *Stimmung*, that colours perception', writes Heinz Paetzhold of Böhme's work.¹³ 'It exists in space,

10 I use the terms 'phonography', 'sound art' and 'music' in the awareness that each is contested. See sound artist Jez Riley French's blog, www.jezrileyfrench-inplace.blogspot.com (accessed 7 July 2008), for interviews with several artists working at the interface of these areas of activity.

11 Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music* (London, 2007), p. 46. Hamilton's definition of 'tonal' is broad and is not restricted to music that uses a discernible key: "'Tone" ... is a relational concept which refers not just to the nature of component sounds but also to how they are structured through rhythm, melody and harmony' (p. 49).

12 See Alan Licht, *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories* (New York, 2007), pp. 78–85.

13 Heinz Paetzhold, 'Adorno's Notion of Natural Beauty: A Reconsideration', in Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds), *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 213–35, at p. 224. Böhme's ideas in

although its parameters cannot be defined.' Böhme himself, in an article written for *Soundscape: the Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, writes of atmospheres as the meeting point between perceiver and world:

Atmospheres stand between subjects and objects: one can describe them as object-like emotions, which are randomly cast into a space. But one must at the same time describe them as subjective, insofar as they are nothing without a discerning Subject. But their great value lies exactly in this in-betweenness.

[...]

Today we can say that music occurs when the subject of an acoustic event is the acoustic atmosphere as such, that is, when listening as such, not listening to something is the issue. This requires further elaboration. But one can say off the top that music in this case need not be something made by humans.¹⁴

Such a notion of 'atmosphere', neither subjective nor objective, pervades much of the work I discuss. Böhme's description of 'listening as such' usefully leads us to a conception of musicality in the natural world that does not impute a quasi-divine aesthetic order to that world. In what follows I will discuss work by six phonographers – Chris Watson, Peter Cusack, Kiyoshi Mizutani, Toshiya Tsunoda, Jacob Kirkegaard and Stephen Vitiello – who use field recordings in ways that transcend the straightforwardly mimetic and which reach a musical or aesthetic form of expression.¹⁵ Several of the phonographers discussed have a background in experimental music.¹⁶ However, each produces work that no longer seeks to push at the boundaries of music. Instead they all show a commitment to the musical qualities of environmental sound if these are understood to include the perception of minimal structure, quasi-tonal or quasi-rhythmic qualities, or textural affinities with the broad sound palette of twentieth-century and contemporary experimental music.

Böhme neatly observes that 'what from the perspective of music was an expansion of musical materials, was, seen from [the] perspective [of acoustic ecology], a discovery of the musicality of the world itself'.¹⁷ The relationship

relation to sound are discussed in David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music Silence and Memory* (London, 2004), pp. 62–3.

14 Gernot Böhme "Acoustic Atmospheres: A Contribution to the Study of Ecological Aesthetics", trans. from the German by Norbert Ruebsaat, *Soundscape* 1/1 (Spring 2000): 14–18, at 15, 17.

15 I have limited this chapter to works released on CD. This necessarily excludes the site-specificity that some would argue is integral to sound art but has the significant benefit of allowing others relatively easy access to the material under discussion.

16 Watson, Cusack, Mizutani and Vitiello. Many of those involved in acoustic ecology either came to field recording through contemporary music or remain active in composition: David Dunn, Douglas Quin, Hildegard Westerkamp, Annea Lockwood and Bernie Krause are cases in point. See Toop, *Haunted Weather*, p. 50.

17 Böhme, 'Acoustic Atmospheres', p. 16.

between 'musicality' and sound, from the viewpoint of the figures I discuss, has an almost circular quality. The 'music' such work acknowledges and references is itself put under pressure to the point of collapse by the post-Cagean imperative to come to an accommodation with non-musical sound.

The notion of representation implicit in the work I discuss appears to be in agreement with Brandon LaBelle's suggestion that the presentation of the aural experience of place in recordings always at the same time involves an acute sense of displacement, a 'backside to soundscape compositions' emphasis on immersion and origin'.¹⁸ Place is never represented in this work without an awareness that listening to one place in another place is intrinsically unsettling, even as it draws the auditor into a powerful identification with the phonographer's original listening experience. This 'sense of displacement' colours the passage from place to sound recording to finished artwork, replacing the holistic, healing ambitions of some soundscape composition with a commitment to a more self-reflexive, formally self-conscious mode of activity.

*

The first phonographer I want to discuss is Chris Watson. The three 18-minute tracks on his *Weather Report*¹⁹ display an interest in narrative structure. There is in this work a clear desire to intervene in the representation of the natural environment and to make explicit the editorial activity of the sound recordist. 'Ol-Oloul-O' compresses recordings made over 14 hours of one day into a single piece. 'The Lapaich' edits together recordings made between September and December in a valley in the Scottish Highlands. 'Vatnajökull' is, from one perspective, an even greater feat of compression: 'the 10,000 year climatic journey of ice formed deep within this Icelandic glacier and its lingering flow into the Norwegian Sea'.²⁰

Watson has worked often in film, television and radio and his experience in organizing acoustic events into persuasive narratives is evident on each of these recordings. Such editing is not new in the field of soundscape composition. Hildegard Westerkamp's *Transformations*²¹ would be a classic example – Westerkamp's voice playfully intrudes at one point on 'Kits Beach Soundwalk', for example, to describe the eq-ing she is using in the studio; she also filters the traffic noises in 'A Walk Through the City' in order to extract pitched sounds that are combined into chords. However, Watson's recordings on *Weather Report* are at a distinct remove from Westerkamp's desire to move from 'noise to silence, from the external to the internal, from acoustic onslaught to acoustic subtlety, from worldly to sacred experiences' or indeed the lost Eden recovered of Schafer's 'macrocosmic musical composition'.²² Watson's is a desacralized soundscape, attuned to its

18 Brandon LaBelle. *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London, 2006), p. 211.

19 Chris Watson, *Weather Report*, Touch, TO:47 (2003).

20 Sleeve note to *Weather Report*.

21 Hildegard Westerkamp, *Transformations*, empreintes DIGITALes, IMED 9631 (1996).

22 Westerkamp, cited in LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 210.

subtle textures but shorn of the larger aspiration of the reconciliation of human and natural worlds through a regenerative act of listening. Instead Watson seems entirely comfortable with his work's relationship to forms of quite jarring electronic music or electroacoustic composition.²³

'Vatnajökull' is the most extreme of the album's tracks and also, in its structuring of sonic events, the most reminiscent of a musical piece. The beginning of the track features deep thuds and groans of ice, and the sound of water splashing. The swooping tones of the wind gradually insinuate themselves into the mix. After several minutes, a crash (a huge block of ice falling into water?) ushers in another set of pitched tones that sound like wind instruments. At such carefully timed moments of drama, the quasi-musical qualities of the piece, if these are understood to include a purposeful structuring of acoustic material, are powerfully in evidence. A change of direction occurs when the sharp cries of gulls and other birds are set against the near-white-noise effects of the wind. The piece moves to its end with the anxious clacking of pistol shrimps' claws, closing a condensed creation narrative that began with the juddering pangs of the ice floes and ends with the melt-waters meeting the ocean.²⁴

It is significant that detailed information on the sources of particular sounds is withheld from the listener. The acoustic qualities of such sounds are clearly prized above their status as the record of a particular natural phenomenon or a particular species in a particular habitat. If the conventionally mimetic field recording aspires to present a realistic 'slice' of the natural world, Watson's *Weather Report* emphasizes instead the artificiality of its own construction. Watson is not concerned on *Weather Report* with whatever integral harmonies the soundscape might harbour or with the possibility of mimetic reproduction. These soundscape compositions gesture towards 'imaginary landscapes' but at the same time they return to the component sounds' status as sounds in themselves. They can be heard both for their indexical function (pointing towards a vague idea in the listener's head of what such an Icelandic landscape might be like) and for their abstract function, as sounds whose complexity and ordering invoke a quasi-musical conception of composition. Böhme's term 'atmosphere' is again helpful in describing the aesthetic space between subjective and objective that Watson synthesizes in the edit.²⁵ The delicacy and subtlety of Watson's work leads the listener into an encounter with 'acoustic atmosphere as such', with a narrative organization of naturally occurring environmental sound that achieves its effects through the telescoping of larger time frames.

23 Watson releases his work on the Touch label, which is associated with experimental electronic music.

24 The shrimp passage was discussed at a sound recording workshop given by Watson at London's Museum of Garden History in November 2007. Watson, who had made similar recordings in many locations, remarked that he believed this sound, normally inaccessible to humans, was the most common sound on earth.

25 See Toop, *Haunted Weather*, pp. 51–5 for lengthy citations from emails in which Watson describes the centrality of sound in creating 'atmosphere'.

Peter Cusack's *Baikal Ice* (Spring 2003)²⁶ is, like Watson's 'Vatnajökull', a recording organized around the gradual liquefaction of ice. The recordings were made on and around the world's oldest and deepest lake, in Siberia, during the spring thaw. They contain none of the dramatic editing of Watson's *Weather Report* album. Instead, the listener is offered a series of untreated recordings, most very short.²⁷ Local dogs bark, a girl sings, the Trans-Siberian railway roars and the phonographer prises himself out of his sleeping bag in the morning. What makes the album remarkable, though, are the underwater recordings of the ice breaking up, made using homemade hydrophones.²⁸ These move between gentle watery sounds, the tinkling of icicles hitting one another and the crunching and scraping of the break-up of the ice. The listener is constantly made aware of the change of state from solid to liquid, happening across a vast expanse of lake.

The ice recordings exemplify the convergence between contemporary nature recording and the forced opening of Western art music to the sounds of the world. It is hard to hear the intense tinkling effects without recalling Xenakis's groundbreaking *Concret PH* (1958), which used a recording of crackling embers as its source material. As is well known, the piece was performed at the Philips Pavilion through 40 speakers alongside Edgar Varèse's *Poem Électronique* (1958) at the Brussels World Fair in 1958.²⁹ *Concret PH* was constructed out of countless miniature events produced by slicing the embers recording into very small segments, piecing them together into sound textures and then layering combinations of these. As Agostino di Scipio remarks, the extreme brevity of the individual fragments produces an indeterminacy of pitch: 'frequency and its perceptual attribute, pitch, are hardly controllable here, as it is impossible for human ears to integrate differences of pitch and amplitude in such brief moments.'³⁰ Di Scipio goes on to claim that 'each fleeting creak of sound in *Concret PH* is a point of catastrophe and discontinuity; it represents a tiny explosion which transforms a bit of matter into energy'.³¹

While it is unlikely that the Xenakis piece even crossed Cusack's mind as he assembled his field recordings, he is sure to be familiar with such landmarks of experimental music. Cusack has been active for many years as an improvising

26 Peter Cusack, *Baikal Ice* (Spring 2003), ReR Megacorp, ReRPC2 (2004).

27 My guess is that nothing more than subtle equalization has been applied to the recordings.

28 Cusack explained this in a posting on the Yahoo! Phonography listserve, 8 December 2007.

29 The pavilion was effectively designed by Xenakis, though le Corbusier, his architectural mentor, initially claimed responsibility. See Nouritza Matossian, *Xenakis* (London, 1985), pp. 116–21. This and other multimedia work by Xenakis is discussed as a precursor of sound art installations by LaBelle, *Background Noise*, pp. 183–93. *Concret PH* is referred to in Hildegard Westerkamp's narration for 'Kit's Beach Soundwalk'.

30 Agostino Di Scipio, 'Compositional Models in Xenakis's Electroacoustic Music', *Perspectives of New Music*, 36/2 (Summer 1998): 201–43, at 204, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833529> (accessed 1 July 2008). Di Scipio's article includes sonographic analysis of sound events in *Concret PH*.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

musician, specializing in guitar, bouzouki and baglama (a Turkish instrument), and was a founder member in the 1970s of the London Musicians Collective. His sense of 'musicality' is correspondingly broad. In the accompanying note to a CD entitled *Noises Off: Sound Beyond Music* that he curated for *Leonardo Music Journal*, Cusack writes: 'although many of the pieces have starting points and connections "beyond music", the end results show a high degree of musicality. Perhaps that is just the bias of my curatorial choice, but maybe there is an inherent tendency in all of us to search for the aesthetic in our everyday hearing.'³² Cusack neither speculates on an objectively present musical ordering in natural sound nor claims music for the domain of human activity. The musical is simply available in the experience of the environment, its 'atmosphere'.

Like Xenakis's *Concret PH*, Cusack's underwater ice recordings portray a process of energy conversion, as solid ice warms and breaks up into icicles and then water. The tinkling of the countless icicles resembles the thicker textures of Xenakis's layered embers and the sound of the water itself is sometimes close to the undifferentiated rush of white or pink noise. At the fringes of this recording of a natural process, I would argue, is a tendency to perceive natural sound not as natural sound but as an outgrowth of the explorations of those at the frontiers of musical experimentation in the twentieth century. Although Cusack's work engages closely with acoustic ecology it does not contain the atavistic yearnings for an unsullied natural state discernible in some of the positions adopted by Schafer and Westerkamp. On the contrary, Cusack's ability to discern a musicality in environmental sound makes him representative of a cultural moment in which the very concept of musicality is under immense pressure. The 'in-betweeness' that Böhme remarks upon in the concept of the 'atmosphere' is again apposite: neither 'music', nor 'sound art' is sufficient to pin down the operations of this phonographic activity.

The 'musicality' of *Baikal Ice* is dependent on perceptual events that operate according to no discernible pattern. The coherence lies in para-rhythms and the relatively unified sound field involved – the ice recordings, although dense with detail, use a quite narrow 'palette' of sounds. Sound travels more quickly through water than through air, and underwater recordings such as those of Cusack (and parts of Watson's *Weather Report*) consequently often have a disorienting spatial quality. There is no pretence at mimetic aural representation at such moments – these are conditions that could not be experienced by the human ear.

On one hand, then, the slow melting heard in *Baikal Ice* and 'Vatnajökull' cannot be heard without an awareness of the effects of global warming. Yet, on the other hand, Cusack and Watson do not set out with the explicit aim of documenting a vanishing soundscape. What they capture and present through hydrophones is a quite artificial version of wilderness available only through the tools of the very same advanced technological modernity that has provoked ecological crisis.³³

32 *Leonardo Music Journal*, 16 (2006): 69–70, at 70.

33 See Toop, *Haunted Weather*, p. 50, for discussion of the esoteric 'ghost zones' – geological events, insect activity, plant-sourced sound – that are explored by contemporary phonographers. Toop remarks on the similarity of many of these environmental sounds

The listener is presented in these recordings with a sonic environment that is aesthetically conceived and presented in terms that depend on human agency.

*

Releases by Japanese phonographer Kiyoshi Mizutani such as *Scenery of The Border: Environment and Folklore of the Tanzawa Mountains*³⁴ work both with and against the conventions of field recording. The title, indeed, plays with the way ethnographic recordings are typically presented. Mizutani has a background in Japanese noise music.³⁵ Solo recordings such as *Transcend Sideways* and *Waterscape*,³⁶ display an interest in feedback and, in the case of the latter, in the noise-generating capacities of everyday objects such as a child's swing or a damp cloth. His more recent field recordings often focus on the interpenetration of human activity and the natural. On several such Mizutani pieces wind rumble, microphone handling noise and passing aircraft – levels of impurity that would be unacceptable to more conventional recordists – are discernible. In interview Mizutani has remarked on the challenge nature presents to the 'musical':

*I am made to think by the sound of nature 'what is the music'. The sound of nature contains a lot of musical messages. It is a signal and information from the nature. It is a musical element included in the nature.*³⁷

In Mizutani's view, musical 'messages' or 'elements' are not the same as music per se, with his recordings inhabiting the state of 'inbetweenness' that is brought into play by the most challenging field recording. On his *Bird Songs* CD,³⁸ he revitalizes the archetypal nature recording, the capture of birdsong (itself a conspicuously acculturated emblem of human aesthetic endeavour). Mizutani's version of this form of recording is to combine 'nature' with extraneous material: scraping a wire fence, the squeaking of polystyrene or feedback. All of these interventions represent the kind of degenerate man-made 'noise' that might for an acoustic ecologist be set against the purity and complexity of the natural 'signal', the beauty of birdsong. Like other of the phonographers discussed in this chapter, then, Mizutani is questioning an essentially Romantic vision of nature that, mediated by contemporary ecological imperatives, counterposes a dream of innocence and a fallen mankind.

to electronic sound.

34 Kyoshi Mizutani, *Scenery of the Border: Environment and Folklore of the Tanzawa Mountains*, And/OAR, and22 (2006).

35 He was a member, with Masami Akita, of Merzbow, the most influential group of the genre. Merzbow has functioned as a pseudonym for Akita since Mizutani left the group in the late 1980s.

36 Kyoshi Mizutani, *Transcend Sideways*, Artware Production, Artware 19 (1997) and Kyoshi Mizutani, *Waterscape*, e(r)otate, ErosCD 001 (1997).

37 <http://jezrileyfrench-inplace.blogspot.com/> (accessed 7 July 2008).

38 Kyoshi Mizutani, *Bird Songs*, Ground Fault, GF010 (2000).

On many of the tracks on the *Scenery of the Border* double CD Mizutani stresses the human presence in the landscape. Sometimes this is manifest in recordings of Buddhist or Shinto ceremonies, and sometimes in the recordings made near a power plant or an electricity substation – natural sounds are presented against a background of persistent electronic hum. Elsewhere nature or animals – birds, the wind, a river – are presented in isolation. The second of the two CDs is, unusually, an ‘enhanced’ CD, containing photos and a high-resolution map of the Tanzawa area. Mizutani puts considerable effort into the documentation of a specific place across different media. He remarks:

*The recorded sounds can be divided into categories such as natural occurrences, animals, man-made structures and folk traditions. The combination of elements found in a particular location determines the character of its atmosphere. To make this CD, I put the different combinations together in a manner of a sonic photo book. Rather than looking for a meaning in individual sounds, I suggest listening with the feeling of gazing at various landscapes, one after another. In any case, the cognitive consistency one maintains when listening to contemporary music is not a requirement here.*³⁹

Writing with classic soundscaper’s attention to overall picture rather than particular detail, Mizutani suggests that a form of listening that is analogous to the gaze is more helpful to the listener than the kind of focused attention that would be directed at music. He wants to stress the relationship between environmental sound and musical sound at the same time as cancelling any attempt to assimilate the two to one another. He suggests a distinction between the ‘cognitive consistency’ of musical listening, in which an implied coherence is projected by the listener on to the acoustic experience, and the less interpretative gesture of the contemplative gaze. Mizutani, then, juxtaposes distinct but related soundscapes with the aim of constructing a slowly evolving, impressionistic rendering of the atmosphere of a particular place.

Mizutani’s note also stresses the historical significance of the Tanzawa mountain region, a relatively isolated border area that has, over the centuries, been the site of many conflicts.⁴⁰ The implication, in the strong version of this idea of acoustic representation, is that features of this troubled history are somehow encrypted in the aural environment. A weaker version of this idea would cause the listener to project an awareness of that history into the listening experience, imbibing a richer awareness of ‘place’ than would be possible with the sounds alone. In either case, the sounds serve as the platform for a larger investigation into the cultural resonances of a specific place. Mizutani’s audio recordings on this release, therefore, engage both the visual and the conceptual spheres, setting in motion complicated interactions between listening and looking, place and displacement, natural and man-made, signal and noise. His interest in the historical dimensions

³⁹ http://www.and-oar.org/pop_and_22.html (accessed 25 June 2008).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

of place suggests that sonic atmospheres can help communicate the shifting drama of mutual interference between man and environment.

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Another Japanese phonographer, Toshiya Tsunoda, demonstrates a more radical and interventionist attitude towards natural sound in his explorations of place. Tsunoda, a founding member of the WtK artists' collective, often works with very sensitive contact microphones or miniature conventional microphones, attaching them to objects in order to probe those objects' acoustic qualities. On many of his recordings he has explored interior spaces by placing microphones inside bottles or funnels or between sheets of metal – the recordings thus produced are therefore a specialized kind of non-electronic acoustic 'processing' of sound and vibrations that find their way to the microphones from outside the enclosing medium. On other recordings he has attached contact microphones to interior or exterior walls, windows and air ducts, seeking out the vibrational qualities of built space. More than Watson and Cusack, then, he directs the ear towards what is not available to ordinary experience, offering what Brandon LaBelle reads as 'an altered understanding' of the spaces we inhabit.⁴¹ Tsunoda's work, in this view, reveals a network of linked acoustic systems that encode forms of human activity.

Often his recordings are presented in ways that juxtapose natural sound with the sound of human activity, feedback or oscillators. The album *Pieces of Air*,⁴² as well as exploring the acoustic properties of pipes and bottles, features relatively conventional recordings of crickets chirping and a windy day by the beach. Yet in these cases wind, crickets and water can all be understood as approximations to electronic sound. Two tracks incorporate low-frequency sine tones. The album *O Respirar Da Paisagem*⁴³ contains a recording of cicadas combined with a creaking window, which sounds like a minimal electroacoustic composition.⁴⁴ Another sound source is presented in two forms, via the medium of 'air' (that is, with conventional microphone) and that of something 'solid' (with contact microphone). Even more challenging to the listener is Tsunoda's *Low Frequency Observed at Maguchi Bay*.⁴⁵ This album combines a set of four contact miked field recordings with filtered versions that remove all material above 20hz, more or less the threshold of human hearing. The filtered recordings – half of the album – are, therefore, literally unlistenable. In the domestic set-up I have, both loudspeakers and headphones register the sounds only as ultra-low throbs and buzzes indicating distress to the hardware. While Maguchi Bay may be an attractive spot, *Low Frequency's* filtered recordings

41 LaBelle, *Background Noise*, p. 239.

42 Toshiya Tsunoda, *Pieces of Air*, Lucky Kitchen, LK016 (2001).

43 Toshiya Tsunoda, *O Respirar Da Paisagem*, SIRR, sirr012 (2003).

44 Schafer, *Soundscape*, p. 39, compares the cicada's sound-producing mechanism to 'a tin lid when pressed in by the finger', the kind of metallic surface that fascinates Tsunoda.

45 Toshiya Tsunoda, *Low Frequency Observed at Maguchi Bay*, Hibari, Hibari 11 (2007).

translate the natural setting into another format altogether, dominated by the distant vibrations of otherwise imperceptible human activity. Everyday human acoustic perception is thus relativized and, strikingly in this instance, shown to occlude man-made sounds.

Many recordists use high-pass filters to remove the low-frequency sounds that our ears habitually edit out for us (these can sound intrusive when listened to through loudspeakers at above ambient levels). Tsunoda reverses this principle, leaving the listener with the acoustic vibration at the border of hearing and feeling. For him, this is a means of arriving at a faithful but non-mimetic representation of place:

Vibration is sustained like the sound of the heartbeat of the space. This is the inherent phenomenon of the space. The vibration is proof of the place's identity/existence. Therefore, as for physical vibrations, all of the incidents/ occurrences are reflected in the space ... When one considers the time and space of the vibration phenomenon, there appears to be a big gap in our consciousness regarding common/ordinary spaces. Through observation, our attention gravitates towards the relationship between the actual world and our perception of it. We thus encounter the intrinsic nature of the place. What's interesting to me is that by recording an actual phenomenon, you can extract the intrinsic quality of an actual existing space.⁴⁶

Despite the apparent abstraction of his work, Tsunoda shares with Mizutani, Watson and Cusack a desire to communicate the aural features of 'actual existing space'. In his case, however, the truth of that representation lies not in what is manifest but in what is hidden. There is a 'gap' between our after-the-fact reorganizations of perception and the 'actual world'. Tsunoda invites us to engage in an expanded form of listening, even if this involves using microphones as an aural prosthesis to uncover hidden layers of sonic information. Again, his renderings of acoustic environments are thoroughly imbued with the imperatives of aesthetic investigation. As with the work of Jacob Kirkegaard and Steven Vitiello, which I will now discuss, concealment and the active intervention of the recordist are integral to an aestheticized form of research practice.

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One of the more extreme sound artists currently working with field recordings is Jacob Kirkegaard, from Denmark. I will comment briefly on two recent releases on the Touch label, each of which is built around a relatively simple concept. The recordings in each case have a textural complexity that has much in common with the further fringes of musical experimentation. With *Eldfjall*,⁴⁷ Kirkegaard, like

46 Toshiya Tsunoda, 'Toshiya Tsunoda', in *Extract: Portraits of Soundartists* (Vienna, 2007), p. 86.

47 Jacob Kirkegaard, *Eldfjall*, Touch, T33.20 (2005).

Chris Watson, uses recordings gathered in Iceland. Rather than glaciers, though, he recorded near the geysers of Krisuvik, Geysir and Myvatn. On these recordings, Kirkegaard, like Tsunoda, is interested in vibration. He inserts accelerometers (very sensitive contact microphones) into the earth and these pick up volcanic activity ('eldfjall' means 'fire mountain' or 'volcano'). Unlike Watson's often rather dramatic narratives on *Weather Report*, Kirkegaard's tracks each present a relatively unchanging quasi-musical idea. In this, they recall the animus against harmony, melody and musical development in much electronic music of the 1990s and 2000s (itself often a revisiting of ideas in the work of La Monte Young, Tony Conrad, Eliane Radigue and others in the 1960s and 1970s). Each piece has a claustrophobic and tightly focused quality, as if it were putting a particular acoustic phenomenon under the microscope. Sudden opening and closing fades accentuate the jagged, bruitiste aspects of the work. It is regrettable, perhaps, that Kirkegaard chooses as his track titles such words as Al-Lat, Aramaiti and Izanami – the names of earth goddesses from different points around the world, thus adding a spurious mythic patina to work that counts a demythologizing impulse towards the environment among its strongest features.

As with Tsunoda, the process of revealing sonic substrata to our experience is constitutive of the artistic event. Kirkegaard in interview demarcates his work from that of scientists in ways that are revealing: 'I am not sure whether scientists think too much about hidden layers, secret messages, whisperings or songs emitted from souls from other frequencies, when they explore the VLF vibrations through their receivers. Maybe they do. In any case there exists a motivation for me there, in the dreams of other spaces, missing links or black holes, as there always are more sides to a fact.'⁴⁸ Kirkegaard here presents himself as a kind of technological shaman, alert to messages that cannot be deciphered through the procedures of scientific investigation. The pieces on *Eldfjall* develop from an aesthetic of hiddenness, with the artist offering a speculative decoding of a world thickly populated with occult meanings.

Kirkegaard's album *4 Rooms*⁴⁹ is specifically concerned with the cultural significance of the acoustics of buildings. In these recordings, Kirkegaard revisits and inverts Alvin Lucier's renowned *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969).⁵⁰ Kirkegaard alters Lucier's process by recording not voice but silence. The pathos of this act of subtraction is the more marked because he uses abandoned public spaces in Chernobyl: a church, a swimming pool, a gymnasium, an auditorium. The resulting

48 Kirkegaard interviewed by Diane Ludin in January 2005 for the New York-based internet art portal The Thing. The interview is archived at www.touchmusic.org.uk/archives/reviews_jacobkirkegaard/ (accessed 16 June 2008).

49 Jacob Kirkegaard, *4 Rooms*, Touch, Tone 26 (2006).

50 Lucier recorded himself reading a short text. He then played back the recording in the same room, using a second tape machine to record the original recording. He then played back and recorded the second recording, repeating the process until nothing was left of his voice, which had been transformed into a complex, multi-layered drone exhibiting the resonant frequencies of the room itself.

recordings are ambiguously pitched drones, rich in overtones. The conceptual dimension of the work is obvious, with the drones serving as the ghostly remainder of the population that left the area after the nuclear reactor disaster of 1986. Sound is conjured from absence in a gesture of collective channelling.⁵¹

Kirkegaard's work combines an austere ear with a curious desire for re-enchantment: ghostly voices and earth goddesses. He makes available to the listener sounds that would otherwise be unimaginable and which sit comfortably alongside avant-garde musical experiments. On these releases, environmental sound is transformed by the use of unusual recording techniques. The work emerges through the creative use of technology by the recordist, who assumes a more composerly role than in the work of some of the phonographers discussed above. If there is a flaw to this suggestive, acoustically rich work, it lies in the suspicion that sound's materiality is used to cloak a fascination with spirit.

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The last example of field recording use that I want to discuss is a reflection on place, environment and art. American sound artist Stephen Vitiello's *Listening to Donald Judd*⁵² uses recordings made during a residency at the Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd's museum in Marfa, Texas.⁵³ Unlike all of the artists discussed hitherto, Vitiello has processed almost all the recordings he made, using time-stretching and other techniques. These original recordings, a liner note explains, were made in and around the Judd buildings and installations. Microphones were attached to Judd's 'specific objects', placed on the floor of the studios housing them, and positioned in the surrounding countryside. Recordings were made from a glider, in fields of grasshoppers and in a street. Marfa is, Vitiello notes, 'a very quiet town'. Among the few recognizable unprocessed sounds is that of the train that passes through the town daily. These recordings span a number of linked contexts: artwork, exhibition space, natural environment, urban environment. As with Kirkegaard's Chernobyl recordings, Mizutani's *Tanzawa* release and Tsunoda's *Maguchi Bay* album, there is

51 Cf. Peter Cusack's Chernobyl recordings. On Gruenrekorder's *Autumn Leaves* online compilation (2007) are two tracks, 'Chernobyl Dawn' and 'Chernobyl Frogs'. Cusack writes: 'Since the nuclear catastrophe of April 26 1986, and in complete contrast to human life, nature at Chernobyl is thriving. The evacuation of people has created an undisturbed haven and wildlife has taken full advantage. Animals and birds absent for many decades – wolves, moose, black storks – have moved back and the Chernobyl exclusion zone is now one of Europe's prime wildlife sites. Radiation seems to have had a negligible effect.' Text available at http://www.gruenrekorder.de/?page_id=181 (accessed 1 July 2008).

52 Stephen Vitiello *Listening to Donald Judd*, Sub Rosa, SR245 (2007).

53 Vitiello's career as a sound artist took off following a six-month residency at the World Trade Center in 1999 when, among other things, he attached contact microphones to the building's windows. This work has, needless to say, gained enormously in retrospective significance. An excerpt can be heard at www.ubuweb.com/sound/vitiello.html (accessed 2 July 2008).

an assumption that a particular place has a specific acoustic signature. Although many of the sounds have been processed beyond recognition, scattered and reassembled as data through digital reconfiguring, Vitiello's contention is that he is still, in a sense – more than ever before, perhaps – 'listening to Donald Judd'.

One of the conceptual fields engaged by this CD's treatment of environmental sound is the controversy that surrounded minimalist art. In the words of one of the foremost opponents of this new 'literalist' art, Michael Fried, minimalism depended on a quality of 'theatricality' that stressed the context and the particular experience of the viewer at the expense of the properly autonomous artwork. For Fried, 'Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. [Robert] Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art "what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]", the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.'⁵⁴

Fried contrasts the modernist painting or sculpture, which transcends its own objecthood and exists in a condition of presentness or grace, to the three-dimensional objects of minimalism. These are greatly limited as artworks, he argues, by their emphasis on duration, context and the spectator. Judd, on the other hand, spurns Fried's transcendent 'presentness', insisting on the actual encounter with the specific artwork. David Batchelor's commentary on Fried's rejection of Robert Morris's ideas – 'what for Fried is the negation of art, is for Morris, the condition of its continuation and renewal' – is equally applicable to the ideas of Judd.⁵⁵ When Judd began buying land and buildings in and around Marfa it was with the intention of establishing a suitable architectural environment to house his work. Vitiello is clearly sympathetic to this emphasis on context. By capturing the acoustic experience of Marfa, Vitiello offers us a single sensory aspect of Judd's artworks and their surroundings, tipping the balance away from artwork and towards context. By processing and recombining much of the audio he resituates Judd's work, translating both art and context into another realm altogether. Both are simultaneously invoked and estranged through presentation in the medium of sound.

By multiplying the contexts of the works' reception in this way, Vitiello directs our attention to the very fact of context. While Guy Marc Hinant's claim in his liner note that Judd's 'specific objects have been absorbing the landscape' seems overstated, *Listening to Donald Judd* depends absolutely on the interdependence of artwork and environment. The drone-like qualities of parts of the work are analogous to the emphasis on simplicity and duration in some minimal art. Yet Vitiello's sonic compositions, with all their roughness and variability of texture, achieve something rather different from the austerity and formal purity that is typically attributed to minimalism.⁵⁶ Going further than Judd, he opens the gallery

54 Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago, 1998), p. 153. Fried cites Morris's 1966 essay 'Notes on Sculpture'.

55 David Batchelor, *Minimalism* (London, 2001), p. 67.

56 See Robert Morris on minimalism's conflicting impulses towards the material and

door on to the surrounding countryside. Judd's attention to obtrusively man-made objects is displaced by the natural sound that leaks in. Here Schafer's conception of signal and noise is reversed, with natural noise productively contaminating the purity of the artwork.

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In all of the work discussed above, there is a wariness of any attempt to obscure the inherent mediatedness of recordings of the natural world. Nature is certainly not made available in a state of prelapsarian grace. Human intervention in the landscape and conspicuous artifice in the recording or editing of these sounds qualifies the idea of the natural. In this form of phonography, natural beauty and artistic practice are mutually dependent and no absolute antithesis between the sound of music and the sound of the world is implied. Such recordings of nature are, on the one hand, always understood to be profoundly cultural and, on the other, close to the musical or aesthetic organization of sound.

My discussions of an 'in-betweenness' that characterizes these developments and critiques of the soundscape can usefully be compared to Robert Smithson's radicalization of the idea of the 'picturesque' presented in the eighteenth-century writings of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin and, in the following century, realized in the parks of Frederick Law Olmsted:

The contradictions of the 'picturesque' depart from a static, formalistic view of nature. The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as a 'thing in itself', but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region – the park becomes a 'thing for us'. As a result we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauvian transcendentalism, or its present-day offspring of 'modernist formalism', rooted in Kant, Hegel and Fichte. Price, Gilpin and Olmsted are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal.⁵⁷

Leaving aside the awkwardness of the application of 'dialectical materialism', Smithson's notion of ceaseless interchange between an obdurately material

the transcendent: 'Minimal art was the attempt to recuperate transcendent Puritan values by reencoding them via an iconoclasm of austere formal spatial purity. At the same time its ambition was to transpose and redeem utilitarian industrial processes and gestalt forms into an aesthetic space of the phenomenological.' See 'Size Matters', *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 474–87, at 480.

57 Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape', in *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 157–71, at pp. 159–60.

landscape and the aestheticizing human hand is a fertile concept. This 'manifold of relations' points us to the kind of dynamic interaction between artist and environment that the phonographers discussed in this chapter achieve. There is in this work, which I find more rewarding than most music released in the same period (that is, since the turn of the century), a radical openness to the aesthetic potential of acoustic atmospheres. The peculiar status of sound in our experience of the world is recognized and manipulated in ways that extend and enrich that experience. The lived experience of 'atmosphere' is re-presented in the highly artificial situation in which we listen to these recordings, mediated by loudspeakers or headphones. The use by phonographers of hydrophones and contact microphones opens up still further dimensions of sound. In these ways, we are both drawn into and distanced from acoustic environments that we might never encounter or that would be impossible to encounter without the aid of specialized technological equipment.

Pure artifice on the one hand, and the natural 'in itself', on the other, are rejected by Smithson in favour of the interaction between the two. The natural is denatured to varying degrees in the phonography discussed in this chapter, while never yet quite relinquishing a residual objectivity. That limit state of otherness is what continues to challenge our notions of aesthetic ordering and what persists in frustrating our attempts to draw it once and for all into the realm of culture. The ungainsayable beauty of such sound exists as a kind of shadow to the beauty we discern in music, a bulwark against aspirations of fully achieved subjective expression. The specificity of both subject and aesthetic object is preserved in this work. Between these poles complex perceptual atmospheres take shape. Advanced phonography of the kind discussed in this chapter makes compelling claims on our attention because of its peculiar ability to offer us not the world but the relationship between the world and its representation.

