Open Sound 2012:
On Air – Making the Inaudible Audible

Surrey Art Gallery

/ Featuring works by
Alex Grünenfelder
Kristian Roos
Debashis Sinha

/ Curated by
Ross Birdwise and Jordan Strom

Open Sound 2012: On Air – Making the Inaudible Audible

/ Introduction to Open Sound 2012

The hidden, the repressed, the lost, the invisible, and the inaudible are explored in Surrey Art Gallery's exhibition Open Sound 2012: On Air – Making The Inaudible Audible. Three audio-based works will be presented at intervals during the year, each artwork giving expression to voiceless and sometimes intangible things. The artists (in order of appearance) are Kristen Roos, Alex Grunenfelder, and Christina Kubisch. This multi-phased project is organized by guest curator Ross Birdwise. The lead-off project Kristen Roos' site-specific sound piece titled Underground uses found sounds and existing furnishings from the Surrey Arts Centre to create a resonant aural and tactile experience. The second project, Alex Grünenfleder's Audio Migration 2012 is a multi-channel sound installation that investigates sound as a site of action, participation and agency—a territory of interactions between human, animal and non-living actors.

On Air – Making the Inaudible Audible is part of the Surrey Art Gallery's Open Sound series. Open Sound is an exhibition program developed in 2008 by the Surrey Art Gallery to support the production and presentation of audio art forms as part of contemporary art practice. Open Sound seeks to feature the leading edge of audio art, and has included site specific installation, radio experiments, ecological practices, and other investigations into the limits of sound today.

/ Kristen Roos: *Underground*
audio recording, amplifier, speakers, sound excitor

/ Alex Grunenfelder: *Audio Migration 2012*
4 chanel audio recording, amplifier, speakers

/ Debashis Sinha: *Hati*
audio recordings, copper bells, speaker, resonators

open
sound
surrey art gallery
audio projects

/ Surfacing Forgotten Spaces
By Ross Birdwise

In 1917, the French composer Erik Satie composed his first piece of musique d'ameublement (furniture music), which had been intended for unfocussed listening in casual settings. Kristen Roos' new work Underground operates in the foyer of the Surrey Arts Centre with this history of lobby-oriented music in mind. The work is integrated into two existing arts centre sofas that are hard-wired to emit ambient musical compositions in a way the listener can both feel and hear. The artist has installed speakers and tactile transducers into the furnishings so that they vibrate and generate low-level sound that is almost only sensible to the sitter. The sound is derived from recordings made in the basement of the Surrey Arts Centre, in the electrical room and the mechanical room.

According to Roos' these droning mechanical noises often either go unnoticed in the background, or are hidden away in underground chambers and near janitor's quarters, spaces strongly associated with blue collar labour. The automated machinery and manual labour contribute to the functionality and comfort of the building and its inhabitants, including staff and visitors. It helps to create a pleasant ambiance. A simple piece of furniture such as a couch also contributes to that atmosphere. Unlike Satie's furniture music, which was intended to fade into the background, Underground utilizes furniture to foreground a hidden ambiance. Roos' states "underground in today's terms, is the space of the janitor, and the electric machines that power the building to bring air and heat. This is an automated space, a kind of robot that for the most part relinquishes us from having to have someone shovel coal and mind the switches, but has not stopped us from using the space to house the tools of the custodian. Interestingly enough, the word robot was coined by Carel Capek, a Czech writer in the play Rossums Universal Robots (R.U.R.), and robot, or rabota in Czech, simply means worker."

For Roos, these sounds also represent the spectres of Surrey's past. Audible and tactile, yet invisible, these sounds have the absent presence of ghosts. They refer to past histories of urbanization and industrialization in the region, as well as the natural spaces that once existed prior to Surrey's development. Furthermore,

these physical, droning, noise-based sounds also signify the underground experimental music scene of Vancouver. This scene includes a variety of noise musicians. Some of these musicians link noise music to machinery and to the human body, and often choose to remain underground (and perform in 'underground' and illegal spaces) out of a kind of pride, and also due to economics, lack of affordable spaces, and the archaic licensing bylaws in Metro Vancouver.

Roos' exploration of the notion of the underground, low frequency and electromechanical sounds is a prominent feature of his other work, including his site-specific installation Ghost Station (2007), which utilized an unused Toronto subway station and subway sounds and a recent soundwalk he led through underground parking garages. Additionally, Roos has been interested in tactile, droning electromechanical sounds since he was a toddler, when he would enjoy pressing his head up against washing machines and dishwashers. Roos speculates that these sounds might also relate to the audiotactile experience of the human fetus experience in the mother's womb. The muted sounds and tactile vibrations of Underground implicitly suggest this association.

/ About the Artist

Kristen Roos is a Vancouver based artist and musician whose practice includes sound design for dance, live performance, electronic music, soundwalks, site-specific installations, and stand alone pieces. The exploration of the underground, the low frequency, and the hidden is present in many of his works. This includes his 2007 piece Ghost Train, which was installed in an unused Toronto subway station and used recordings derived from subwoofers and subway trains. As part of a recent Vancouver New Music Soundwalk called Below the Surface, Roos guided participants through the soundscape that lies deep beneath the city in the reverberating cement caverns known as parking lots. Roos' work can be seen at www.kristenroos.com.

/ *Human Animal: On Alex Grunenfelder's Audio Migration*
By Ross Birdwise

Aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for birds.
Barnett Newman

Nature and culture. Human and animal. How do they differ?
How are they similar? Are they permanently separated
or are they continuous in some way? Alex Grunenfelder's
acoustic ecology-inspired sound installation *Audio Migration*
(2012) invites the listener to explore these questions.
Installed in the courtyard of the Surrey Arts Centre, a
liminal space that is at once inside and outside, natural
and unnatural, Grunenfelder's sound piece takes the form
of a four channel audio installation (9 mins, 47 secs) that
focuses on the songs and calls of birds and human vocal
noises, including whistling and speech.

Audio Migration is ordered into three movements. The
first movement begins with the sounds of bird species you
would currently find around the actual Arts Centre site,
with the hope of drawing wild birds in. As it progresses,
the bird calls are gradually replaced by the sounds of
human vocalists* imitating birds (a professional whistler/
multi-instrumentalist, an experimental vocalist, and a
performance artist), as well as composite sounds created
from mixtures of human and bird sources. Furthermore,
sometimes the vocalists deliberately create sounds that
fall between human and bird, the sounds of one thing
becoming the other thing, the sound of the transition. For
Grunenfelder, the first movement represents a blurring of
the boundaries between human and animal.

The second movement is the most conventionally musical.
It creates a fictional duet between human voices (often
imitating birds or using bird sound as inspiration) and bird
sounds recorded at various times and locations. In this
movement the line between human and animal is more distinct
and the relationship between them frequently seems
harmonious and intertwined.

The third movement is the most sonically ugly, fragmented,
and abstract. It uses a very cut-up, 'glitchy' style of
audio editing. Sounds abruptly start and stop, often
before they can complete what they are doing. The feeling
is one of awkwardness, disorder and collision. Fragmented
bits of foreign languages, birdcalls, human gibberish,
involuntary vocal noises (coughs, grunts, etc.), electronic
alarm noises, and other sounds destabilize and surprise the
listener. At times the alarm noises function as calls, like
the bird calls in earlier movements, which hail the listener.
An alarm sound not only addresses the listener but also
conveys a call to action. It could mean "get up and go
to work" or "a car, possibly yours, is being stolen". These
sounds are action oriented and situate the listener as a

subject (at once active and passive) in a network of social and technological power relationships, much as certain birdcalls serve as warnings for other birds, such as drawing attention to the presence of a predator in the complex matrix of the "natural world". The disorder of the third movement is meant to convey strange encounters between members of different species and technologies – a kind of disorder that is possible when different entities have deeply entangled, possibly antagonistic or uneven relationships to one another. This movement attempts to portray each sound as a unique voice in a swarm-like, collective conversation. Sounds call and respond, blend and interrupt one another in a constant, multi-faceted back and forth movement of intense communication.

With *Audio Migration*, Grunenfelder has created a work that engages with notions of acoustic ecology, that is, the relationships, mediated through sound, between different living entities in an environment. He treats the different entities and their relationships in varying ways, suggesting that in some ways the line between human and animal, and natural and unnatural, might not be as clear as we once thought it was, that there are possibilities for both harmonious and antagonistic or absurd relationships between different entities, and that even a non-living entity, such as a car alarm or an alarm clock, has something to say, a way of acting on and in the world, even if it is non-living. Grunenfelder also suggests, especially in the third movement, that our relationships with other things, including other humans, birds and technology, are in no way linear or predictable. He posits chaos, complexity and non-linear forms of causality and action instead of simple, clear and unchanging forms of interaction. For me, this implies an expanded notion of what ecology is.

*Whistling by Tess Kitchen; vocal performances include Junko Ogawa and Ross Birdwise; additional vocals from dobroide (www. freesound.org/people/dobroide/)

/ About the Artist

Alex Grünenfelder pursues a creative practice that combines the project development methods of the graphic design industry with the critical discourse and dialogical goals of the liberal arts. His academic history includes studies at McGill University and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He has been working in the field of graphic design since 2000 with a focus on the arts, environmental and not-for-profit sectors. He is a co-founder and director of the Vancouver Design Nerds Society, an organization that facilitates discussion and collaboration between designers, artists and the public. His artwork explores the power of media to shape the perception of environments.

Debashis Sinha
Hati

/About the artwork
Hati is one of a series of works exploring the idea
of infrasonic (i.e. below the range of human hearing)
communication between elephants, and the presence of this
unheard phenomenon in the world around us. These 2 pieces,
here exhibited for the first time, allude to the rest of the
cycle of work in which the Hindu elephant headed god Ganesh
begins to make his presence felt as a character in this
exploration of elephants and the unseen. In essence, Hati
as it is exhibited here is a prelude to a larger assemblage of
works that are to come, an assemblage that conflates the
worlds of sound, of Hindu myth, of the role of technology
(one of Ganesh's many roles in Hindu legend was that of the
scribe of the Hindu epic Mahabharata) and how Sinha uses
these sources to playfully re-imagine his south Asian cultural
heritage in light of his own experience.
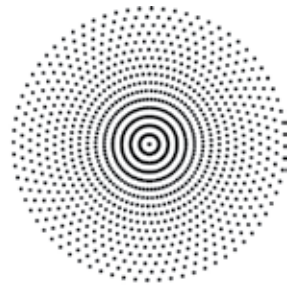
/Artist's Statement
The ebb and flow of the wave of sound is of similar mass,
undulating through the atmosphere. Carving a line from
one consciousness to the next, conveying information
in tones too low for us to hear or understand. We can
feel it in our bones, in how they shake and quiver as the
wave passes through us, but otherwise they are wisps,
figments of our imagined unseen world, like atoms. Or
God.

/About the artist
Debashis Sinha's continuing musical practice and re-
interpretation of himself as an artist comfortable working
in various media have allowed him to realize projects and
performances internationally. He has been a recipient of
grants from The Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario
Arts Council, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Chalmers
Foundation. In 2009 he won the XIV Radio Creation Works
contest, awarded by Centro para la Difusión de la Música
Contemporanea in association with Radio Clasicá and Ars
Sonora, a major international prize to create new radiophonic
work. Other notable recent projects include a 2010 solo CD
release Anudrutam, and the official launch and recording of
transatlantic duo Knuckleduster, with Berlin laptop artist
Robert Lippok.

Open Sound

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