A Conversation with Mark Peter Wright

Interviewer: Julia Yezbick

Between 2011 and 2014 Mark Peter Wright recorded the environmental sounds of South Gare, UK as part his ongoing research. During the latter stages of the project he began rebroadcasting his archive back onsite before deleting the sound files. This conversation, between Mark and Sensate Founding Editor, Julia Yezbick, examines some of the context and motivations behind the process along with the making of two films published [here] that represent the work.

Performance

JY: Performance plays on the temporal present as something that is "live," must be witnessed *in situ*, **and cannot be experienced in the same way twice. Can you talk about how you came to this format/ medium as a means of expression for this project and how the screen capture movie both acts as performance and defies this category?**

MPW: For me the screen format sits somewhere between video art, academic research and audio-visual essay. I began to use the method in 2014 when I made a film that drew upon Alvin Lucier's text and performance piece *I am Sitting in a Room* (1969). The work was called *I am Sitting in a Screen* and tried to convey the visual display unit as another room within which we can think through sound and space [1]. I'm interested in what "site" means today for me, someone who (unfortunately) resides in a laptop most of the time. What does it mean for me to treat the screen as an actual environment? What are its connective ecologies? How does its' representation differ from cinematic (big screen) histories?

Whilst doing the fieldwork in South Gare (2011-2014) I also had a desk in my apartment with books and writing everywhere and notes all over the wall. My laptop became a place where all that work began to formulate. The screen turned into an equal residence of study and offered an alternative to the traditional options of an outdoor site or gallery space. I began to use the screen as a para-environment where words and images would collage and create something new but in a way that was somehow more representative of process: something a little more messy. That's how I research; it's quite fragmented, things come and go, and writing doesn't hit the Word document fully formed. Thoughts become illuminated then obscured and the framework for what is deemed "research" is constantly challenged and agitated. So I was interested in how these films could re-perform that process whilst at the same time, through their constant

obfuscation, disrupt how academic research becomes ossified through text and referencing orthodoxies.

The films are not "live" in the sense of a one time only stream of consciousness. They are constructs drafted as quasi-screenplays and then performed and re-performed. It was a huge labor of effort: constructing films within films, testing and re-testing. The laptop was also working hard and really struggled with its own capacity to handle multiple content: you can hear its fan whirring particularly towards the end of the films. So this sense of exhaustion, which comes through any type of performance, is not exclusive to me, it was also re-inscribed through technology.

It's worth saying that the laptop, and most smart technologies are really audio-visual tracking agents. They now perform listening and seeing back onto us [2]. So I was also keen to engender a speculative aesthetic scenario whereby the screen was actually capturing me: it was recording my own process of making. This is very important to how I think about recording environments and nonhumans more broadly; it's a reciprocal performance full of multiple subjective captures. In other words, things hear me as much as I claim to hear them. Because Sensate offers the possibility of doing something quite radical in terms of form I was able to build these experimental ideas from the start.

JY: During the screen capture you playback field recordings made at South Gare but were they actually being re-recorded from the room space, or all internally within the space of the computer? If you were to have sneezed while making this screen capture, would it have been recorded into the movie?

MPW: Yes, the sounds are being played back from the laptop speakers through the air and simultaneously re-recorded by the internal microphone. So the recording is a blend of the room and the rebroadcasted sounds in this very lo-fi way. If I had sneezed it would be in there. I thought about myself as a marginal construct throughout making the work actually. I played with how shocking it would be to introduce my voice at various points but eventually decided that would be a little too didactic. Instead I wanted to be a performative presence somewhere in the margins and trust sound's materiality whilst allowing the listener to build and dismantle an imaginary identity over the duration – one that could include their own. Maybe it's only me that can hear (know) it, but if you listen closely my chair creaks at times; I clear my throat; people are walking by in the street outside as construction work goes on. I wanted to let all that porosity in whilst re-recording but at the same time degrade it through the quality of its re-capture. So the film, the room and myself would be continually forming and erasing itself.

Site / Site-specificity

JY: In Part One, you end with phrases such as: "chimeric augmentations" and "Recordings place and displace." How do the aesthetic choices you've made throughout this project change the sited-ness of the piece? Were there stages of the project that felt more site-specific than others? Why? The "site" of the piece, in many ways, is now the web. What does site-specificity mean when we have the ability to extract images and/or sounds, and circulate them within these new networks of exchange and mediation?

MPW: Overall I began the research in South Gare thinking I would come to represent something undeniably site-specific but this unraveled during the process. I gradually turned the microphone back on myself as much as the environment in an attempt to listen to my own listening and develop a more ethical and self-reflexive project. As Hal Foster has written, the critical test of such re-positioning rests precariously between a project of self-reflexivity turning into one of self-absorption [3]. The films, I hope, counter the latter point through their networked and augmented identities.

So my relationship to site is unsustainable, like the desire to represent site is historically fraught. Land Art being the most potent art historical example that shows the inherent struggle to remain rooted to place whilst the (elsewhere) reality of a limited viewing/hearing public brings back institutional pressures of participation and discourse. Historically speaking, essentialist site-specificity is achieved through the physical alteration of a place. My research is related more toward performance-based and ficto-poetic approaches along with an expansive accommodation of heterogeneous media and documentary methods, which if anything, strives to propel site-specificity into something more inclusive and accessible than a purely phenomenological "being there" approach.

Going back to the use of the laptop, the screen became a digital space to think through Robert Smithsons' Non-site works (1968-1973) [4]. Extracting materials specific to a particular site of study, Smithson would then re-present pieces of slate, earth or soil for example, within the confines of the gallery walls. For Smithson the gallery was as parallel non-site, a place that distorted the very notion of site-specific art and where the materials on display acted as indexes towards another time and place. In doing so his outdoor site became as imagined as it was physically real. On the back of this I started to think about the fact that I carry a non-site in my pocket everyday - my phone. So these technologies and mobile devices, including laptop screens, potentially allow a more everyday adaptation of the non-site model [5].

Zombies and the re-vivification of media

JY: The Internet increasingly seems to defy the irreversibility of time. Even if we were to limit the number of times a viewer could view a page, the Wayback Machine could retrieve and revive it. What does it mean for the work to continue to exist in this form as a kind

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of digital zombie that is never fully deleted or erased, and yet is never exactly preserved either?

How do these digital ecologies relate to an artist you reference such as Gustav Metzger? The process of burning/destroying something is a striking social and political spectacle, but deleting a file is so often a solitary, personal act. Can you speak a bit to the differences in both politics and ethics between these works and your own acts of erasure?

MPW: A digital zombie is such a great way to think about these films. Jussi Parikka is useful to reference here as he argues media never dies and that it can be approached in more ethical and resourceful ways through an emphasis on its re-animation [6]. There's a frugal mindfulness to "zombie media" that I like and have certainly been inspired by in this project. Parikka also talks about the hardware components of digital media and their geopolitical connections to mining, labor and waste [7]. I think my project deals with mediation more than materialist media to some extent, but we can still say mediation also never dies. So I think of these films as zombies in the positive sense of their proliferation, where the emphasis is not on making a new image or sound but more so on re-cycling what's already there.

In Metzger's case destroying his artworks challenged hierarchical power structures. My own independent question throughout was: how can personal archives destabilize institutional orthodoxies? There are other references to erasure that could have been there: Annea Lockwood's *Piano Burning* (1968), John Latham's *Skoob Tower Ceremonies* (1964-68), and more recent media works such as Monochrom's *Magnesium Party* (2005) or Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Cloud* (2002).

Rebroadcasting sounds back on-site can actually be a very social event with random people stopping for discussion. I've had some interesting conversations with fishermen. Once I explained what I was doing and a guy said it "sounds a bit like when we throw fish back into the water." I should say deletion/erasure of any kind is highly problematic and I hope that complexity retains in the films. Deletion was not implemented as some kind of resolution nor neo-luddite tactic. It's used as a way to confront the limits of site and its re-presentation; to counter nostalgic notions of belonging; to question what it means to constantly accumulate and to ask what it is I'm actually capturing. The irony and paradox of the situation is that a recording is as there as it is not – it's a shadow of an original event so on the one hand "yeah, lets capture everything" it's not a finite resource, but on the other, "no", perhaps we have to think more creatively around rights and agential distribution within a recording context that is always highly asymmetrical. So I think of it as a personal and productive non-violent gesture that endeavors to raise an aural "consciousness of capture." It's flawed, paradoxical

and full of doubt – like recording itself. It's certainly not about stopping recording or saying that sound somehow has a home. For me the emphasis rests on problematizing the common view that environmental/nonhuman sound(s) are a resource to be drained for aesthetic design purposes. This type of history and contemporary legacy only reinforces certain anthropocentric ideals of purity or harmony – that frightens me more than zombies!

Ethics **JY: Clearly, you have been grappling with the ethics of recording environmental sound. Can you elaborate a bit more on what you mean by the asymmetry of field recording? What are the consequences of recording environmental sounds? When we think of the neocolonial connotations of field recording (going into a specific place, extracting some sensorial attribute of that place, and returning with it to be put on display as indicative of that specific locale), what are the ethics that emerge specifically from sound recording? Are sounds somehow less representational than images, and thus less ethically fraught?**

MPW: When I talk about asymmetry I am drawing upon postcolonial studies and specifically Mary Louise Pratt's "Contact Zone" [8]. Her text *Imperial Eyes* (1992) coined the word as well as the now often cited "autoethnography." Contact "emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" (Pratt, 1992:7). Moreover, Contact Zones are comprehended in terms of "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radical asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt, 1992:7).

Asymmetrical contact is the foundation for any environmental recording activity. I point the microphone. I choose its mode of representation. I capture, remove, and manipulate the sounds of places, people, animals, and phenomena. Recording is built out of this imbalance and uneven distribution of (human to nonhuman) power. To stress again however, the films do not attempt to flatten or rectify this but instead critically interlace such tensions.

I am interested in what consequences might arise from probing this latent asymmetry. One outcome is a greater focus on ethical questions around agency and rights. The purported ephemerality of sound and non-visible impact of its capture has led to the practice being deemed inconsequential. But surely it is ecological, critical, and creative to think about the consequences of my own digital footprint, however ambiguous a territory that may be. So there's a kind of invisible ethics around embodiment and affect that I think practice can do so much better than hard codes of conduct or representational discourse.

The most telling consequence to arrive out of Pratt's work, if transposed here, is that the physical site is transformed into a participatory arena where human and nonhuman relations are performed and enacted. The field becomes a Contact Zone and as a result, site can no longer be approached as a compositional re-

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source based on legacies of classification or abstraction: it becomes more about how an environment, animals, and technology capture and "do" upon me.

I'm not convinced sound recordings are less representational than images. I think this is a bit of a meta-myth that allows the (sound art) field a false sense of impunity and a consequent privileging and separation of listening over other senses. For me this discussion starts with the microphone. It's a tool of power connected to military industrial histories. Materially speaking it's built from rare earth elements such as Neodynium that are mined straight out of the earth. So the microphone has a wide net of historical and material ecologies that when considered fully bring in political consequences. In that sense I would argue no sound recording can ever be any less ethically fraught than an image. All of this is discussed in forthcoming article I have written for Leonardo Music Journal.

Non-human Agents

JY: Can we think of sounds themselves as agentive?

MPW: I find the idea of sound as an agent or "thing-in-itself" both fruitful and fraught territory that has been explored in the past through something like acousmatics [9]. Christoph Cox has written about materiality and sound with historical references from Nietzsche and Spinoza [10]. I think a contemporary context comes through new materialism and post-feminist discourse from the likes of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti [11]. For me this context is useful in that unlike acousmatics, which is historically accused of being asocial, feminist new materialism is integrally connected to political and collective forms of understanding and power distribution. It brings "biopolitics, critical geopolitics, and political economy together with genealogies and phenomenologies of everyday life" (Coole & Frost, 2010:28) [12]. This context would hold onto the vibrant materiality of sound as a phenomenon, but also retain social bonds, which have ecologies and therefore ethics and politics attached.

I think the importance in any discussion around material agency is how it all reconnects back to a human world – how it engages with urgent matters around gender, race, economic inequality and power distribution: very real present-day forces driven by capitalism and neoliberal politics. So this discussion has to keep hold of the human at the same time as going beyond a human-centered point of view of the world.

I'm interested in the very real yet speculative ambiguity around how nonhumans perceive me. I like to think of things reciprocating my listening: distributing subjectivity across the field over many agents including animals and the tools I am using. This inter-connected web is acting upon me as much as I purport to hear them. Thinking this leads to no rational conclusion but it allows my practice to begin incorporating issues of agency, performance and self-presence, and a good dose of humor. I would always stress that I don't want to dissolve into a bird or present objective facts. I want to draw out levels of relational antagonism

and difference within such close-knit environments. I will never know what an animal feels or hears. That loss of knowledge is a productive form of difference, which I think can help romanticized histories of human-Nature dissolution.

Within the acknowledgement of nonhumans it's worth saying that "we" are all nonhuman to some extent. A friend recently reminded me that the human body is made up of 90% bacteria (microbes, fungi etc). In other words, we are more nonhuman than human. So when we are "capturing" something we are also capturing our nonhuman other, which is a fairly terrifying thought close to some kind of body-horror: the idea of hearing one's other self as an uncanny revelation, which probably gets us back to zombies again if we follow it through!

Preservation and Archiving

JY: Poet Philip Larkin has written: the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. In what ways are field recordings an act of preservation? In what ways are they inherently fraught? What do soundscape compositions do? Clearly compositions are altered, abstracted, and edited to fit within sonic and aesthetic preferences of the composer. What work do these compositions do? How can we think of this inevitably altered archive relationally and temporally? Who is it for and what is its shelf-life?

MPW: Environmental recordings and compositions are ethnographic representations as much as conventional texts or visual images are. They contain huge archaeologies of time and sensorial information that is undeniably powerful. A last known recording of an extinct species is a potent example. It's easy to see how an all-pervasive culture of altruism grows out of recording for preservation purposes: a baseline assumption emerges that capturing sound can only be a force for good. I like to challenge that a little and disrupt the meta-belief that animals need us; atmospheres need capturing, birdsong needs identifying and forests need composing – they don't.

The issue of preserving doesn't go away through recording, the focus just shifts onto the media carrier. Digital files are still open to corruption and in most cases don't decay over time but simply disappear. So recording doesn't solve the preservation race. Birds will continue to go extinct as will formats decay and playback machines die, albeit in a zombie kind of way. Preservation is not mutually exclusive from death; they are part of the same cycle that keeps eating itself.

Even if we could capture everything we wouldn't be able to maintain the machinery needed for playback, let alone have the human time span to experience any of it: absurdly it may as well be as there as it's not. There's a tactical argument that preservation is now best approached through circulation – we're back to zombie mediation again - letting enough files go out into the world as a way of broadening the risk of storing one or two "hard" copies in a basement/hard drive somewhere. In some ways UbuWeb is a good example through its emphasis on

access and proliferation. This gets me back to the project as a whole; it's not a rebuttal of preservation but simply another option that's as equally flawed.

JY: Can you talk about the reoccurring theme of "loss" in the work. What is an archive of loss?

MPW: Loss functions as an overriding background to the whole project. We are living in an age of finitude and extinction. How are we to do something productive, even positive about it? It's a big question but I think there may be something in creatively embracing loss as a methodology for practice. It would be interesting to see what would happen if pedagogical scenarios took on some of the more scarier, morbid stuff. I know media activist Marcel O'Gorman, author of *Necromedia* (2015), has integrated Thanatology into his teaching curriculum. I think this is a fantastic idea when dealing with media on any level. We might actually be able to address imperceptible "Hyperobjects" [13] such as climate change if we start to creatively confront the limits, deaths, and possible afterlives of our own capacities and technologies.

Loss also bleeds back into the discussion of there always being something of a loss in the act of preservation. There's also loss tied into the audiophiles chase for fidelity. CD's purported "perfect sound forever" never quite worked and lossless compression seems a completely ironic pursuit to me. This project involves the loss of site-specificity, objective truth, and representational data; loss in terms of nonhuman knowledge production – that I'll never know what an animal hears or feels and that's a very productive (loss-based) difference.

The main thing I'm interested in all of this is not to make work that turns into some nostalgic move backwards or accelerationist drive forwards into oblivion. I'm trying to confront these limits by nesting relationships in close proximity. So an archive of loss has to become everything: horrific and humorous, real and fictive, sincere yet flawed, elsewhere yet unbearably intimate, monstrous and human – and that probably takes us back to zombies again!

Notes

1. See: http://www.lydgalleriet.no/?page_id=1170

2. See: http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jun/23/google-eavesdropping-tool-installed-computers-without-permission

3. Foster, H. (1996) The Return of the Real. Massachusetts: MIT Press

4. Smithson, R. (1968) A Provisional Theory of Non-sites. In: Flam, J. (ed) (1996) Robert Smithson: the Collected Writings. Oakland: University of California Press, p.364.

5. I would always stress a political reading when mentioning any technological use. What are the power relations of "smart" non-sites? Who owns that non-site? Who is excluded from it?

6. See: http://jussiparikka.net/2012/09/05/zombie-media-in-leonardo/

7. Parikka, J. (2015) A Geology of Media. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

8. Pratt, M.L. (1992) Imperial Eyes. London: Routledge.

9. Acousmatics being based on the study of sound as an object stripped of referential context.

10. Cox, C. (2011) Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism. Journal of Visual Culture.

11. Barad, K. (2011) Nature's Queer Performativity. Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences. Vol. 11 (2) pp.121-185. Bennett, J. (2010) Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Durham: Duke University Press. Braidotti, R. (2002) Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. Cambridge: Polity Press.

12. Coole, D.H & Frost, S. (eds) (2010) New Materialisms. Durham: Duke University Press.

13. Morton, T. (2013) Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.