

THE POETICS OF NOISE

*Reflections while recording and listening to
"From Land to Sea" (20'10")*

"Sometimes I'm so sick of music. All I want to hear is noise that I might imagine music into, when music occupies so much cultural space, you yearn for any noise that wasn't meant to be music, that is fresh and complicated and free from aesthetic intention (and therefore available for aesthetic invention)."

- Brian Eno's diary entry for 20 April, 1995

Noise is everything, and everywhere; it is usually considered as unwanted, disruptive, hindering, unpleasant to the ears, and mostly perceived as a background until we decide to actively listen to it. That particular moment, when we hear things that have always been there for the first time, is absolutely peculiar and fascinating when exploring environments through sound. It relates to the idea of an *undersound*, introduced to me by video artist Bill Viola. He uses the word to describe a sort of background noise for the world; a constant sound, absorbing all the other sounds, of which the exact source cannot be determined - its cause remaining invisible and untraceable. There is a simultaneous complexity and simplicity about this concept, and upon opening a window at night, this kind of sound became most clear to me.

When a most of what we normally hear and perceive has gone to sleep, other noises can reach the ear: the so-called quiet of the night makes way for a distant, almost homogenous humming. We tend to think about the night as silent, but the very first time I tried recording its atmosphere outside my window around midnight, an airplane flew by, its motor deafening all the other subtle sounds for quite some time. While noise can surely interrupt sleep, obscure and threaten clear communication, muffle other valuable sounds, it also has a calming effect and is commonly used to fall asleep to. Noise is everything, and nothing. It feels dark, but can be uplifting at the same time.

In a way, this sound installation is a documentation of listening experiences at the street- and seaside as well as accumulating thoughts on road noise, the role of oil in a society, the mobilisation of energy, traffic, our collective actions, individual and common responsibilities, information overloads. Once I started to pay attention to the noises of the street, I needed to find ways to make the aggressive sound of cars more bearable, which in turn made me wondering if the mechanical car sound has become a sacred noise? If there were similar sounds I could think of that could bring me peace? I imagined the sporadic waves of raging vehicles as sea waves; later, however, I would have to discover that the nuances heard in car and sea waves still differ greatly.

From Land to Sea captures noises coming from the road, sea waves, human beings, birds, vehicles, sirens, crowds, screams and other machines both in their intimacy and remoteness, meaning and senselessness, subtlety and harshness, creating a certain tension between feelings of play, leisure, happiness, and on the other hand urgency, chaos and catastrophe. While watching the road from the sixth floor of an apartment, I saw a bird landing on a branch, stretching its wings, raindrops falling down from the trees onto the concrete, footsteps of a boy running across the street, a subtle smile, but only heard noise.

Noise symbolises what can not be categorised, spanning a bridge between extremes, opening doors for the imagination. Noise is rich in harmonics, encompasses all frequencies, and carries both a destructive and constructive force; as a possibility for inspiration, creative work, a new listening experience. By listening long enough, pitches start to get lifted from that constant source of sound, new rhythms and rooms are being opened. So many different machines have now come to characterise our daily lives that meanwhile, the variety of noises seems infinite. Modern life has become rich in all sorts of noises, and while we fail to focus on all of them, we might feel flooded. Flooded by information, catastrophe, speed, circulation, possibility. And at the same time, the ear needs more and more to feel satisfied; the contemporary landscape often contributes to a great impoverishment of experience.

As the waves of vehicles and the sea waves accumulate during the piece, nothing we do is without effect. Our thoughts and actions accumulate over time, we store memories in our bodies, we collectively contribute to the noise levels we complain about, and more general, to the state of the earth, we feed and get fed. However, infinite accumulation is not possible; in the end, there will be indistinguishable noise, and it is up to us to make sense of it again. One can only postpone an immense chaos already being created.

FROM LAND TO SEA (20'10'')
sound installation by Geraldine Vanspauwen

I. An infinite mine of noises

II. Music-making machines

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Geraldine Vanspauwen's sonic composition, *From Land to Sea (20'10'')*, follows journeys taken by oil between road and nature. Sounds are staged as stories, recordings of waves of vehicles and sea waves merge, obscuring boundaries between mechanical and natural sounds.

The piece begins by exploring sources and movements that cause and are caused by noise. It culminates in a musical landscape shaped by endless feedback, reverberations and delays. What is typically perceived as background noise, becomes the main force within this piece, resulting in both chaotic and peaceful floods of sound within the darkened room. Listeners are encouraged to reflect on common actions and inherent responsibilities; the speeds and chronic noise levels that dominate contemporary landscapes, and their impact on our dreams and imagination.

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