Noises and Whispers: Writing about Audiovisual Reverberations in Contemporary Art

Anne Zeitz

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REFERENCES

Alexandre Castant, *Les Arts sonores : son & art contemporain*, Charleroi : Transonic ; Bourges : La Box, 2017
Laura Poitras, *Astro Noise: A Survival Guide for living Under Total Surveillance*, New York : Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016
A Personal Sonic Geology: Mathieu Copeland & Philippe Decrauzat, Paris : Frac Ile-de-France ; Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2017

- 1 It is through the lens of sound that two books, recently published to mark earlier exhibitions, reflect on the cultural, institutional and political setting of contemporary art in the early 21st century. The volume *A Personal Sonic Geology* by Philippe Decrauzat and Mathieu Copeland, which refers to the exhibition of the same name held at Le Plateau in 2015, and *Astro Noise: A Survival Guide for Living Under Total Surveillance* by Laura Poitras, produced in association with her exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016, question works within which sounds and images dialogue, going well beyond any synaesthetic expression. These two publications are more than exhibition catalogues. They question the relation between the exhibition and the narrative associated with it.
- 2 *A Personal Sonic Geology* at Le Plateau consisted of five simultaneous broadcasts of the same video and sound track projected onto different monochrome paintings in a dark room. The intermingling of images revealed the superimposition of two film tracks made up of sequences from various 20th century artistic and musical sources, creating an impression of audiovisual layering. The geological paradigm ran through the exhibition, as it does

through the book. The hundreds of images which follow one another in a constant variation ask to be looked at and leafed through layer by layer. In the vein of his book *Rumour and Radiation: Sound in Video Art*,¹ Paul Hegarty interprets this as “creative dissonance”. He presents the potential of noise—which, according to him, shows itself in the interstices of audiovisual arrangement—by criticizing the at once theoretical and formal sterility of confining works which include an acoustic dimension.

- 3 Noise re-appears in a quite different form in Poitras’s *Astro Noise*, which is inspired by the cosmological acoustic reverberations of the Big Bang. It incarnates a questioning of “post-Snowden” art and the challenges of mass surveillance. The book contains visuals of different films made by Poitras since 11 September 2001, as well as factual and fictional writings about the auditory dimension of present-day “sousveillance” (cybersurveillance or “dataveillance”)—in particular in the text *Listening to the Moons* by the American artist Trevor Paglen. *Astro Noise* analyzes all the world’s whisperings which can be potentially intercepted. The images revealing the processes intercepting radar signals, satellites and drones in the *Anarchist* programme disclosed by Snowden describe and frame the book’s textual part.
- 4 Cacophonies, noises, whispers: the sound that is displayed in *A Personal Sonic Geology* and in *Astro Noise* is diffuse and confused in its relation to the visual, acoustic, artistic and extra-artistic elements on which it is based. These exhibitions and books also reveal that it is futile to want to define one sound art. In the wake of Alan Licht’s *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*² which, in 2007, provided an encyclopaedic and richly illustrated answer to the question of what sound means in art, Alexandre Castant’s *Les Arts sonores: son & art contemporain*³ is part and parcel of the approach to an inventory book. After *Planètes sonores: radiophonie, arts, cinéma*⁴ and *Journal audiobiographique: radiophonie, arts, cinéma*⁵, he opts here for a path that is at once theoretical and personal, using a surprising number of artists’ works, some of whom are very little known about. It is not insignificant that the first chapter tends towards the sound-image, and that the last chapter questions works on the threshold of perception. In the wake of the major exhibitions *Sound Art: Sound as a Medium of Art* (2013) at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien in Karlsruhe, and *Soundtracks* (2017) at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, Alexandre Castant demonstrates the ubiquity of sound in contemporary art, from video works to (almost) imperceptible installations, while *Astro Noise* and *A Personal Sonic Geology* apply a line of thinking about noise—as introduced by Paul Hegarty—as an “undesirable, unexpected, uncontrollable, shapeless”⁶ residue.

NOTES

1. Hegarty, Paul. *Rumour and Radiation: Sound in Video Art*, London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015
Read his “Eon Cores Noise Prospecting in A Personal Sonic Geology”, *A Personal Sonic Geology: Mathieu Copeland & Philippe Decrauzat*, Paris : Frac Ile-de-France ; Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2017, p. 370-380 and p. 430-438

2. Licht, Alan. *Sound Art: Beyond Music, Between Categories*, New York: Rizzoli, 2007

3. Castant, Alexandre. *Les Arts sonores : son et art contemporain*, Charleroi : Transonic, 2017
  4. Castant, Alexandre. *Planètes sonores : radiophonie, arts, cinéma*, Blou : Monografik, 2007
  5. Castant, Alexandre. *Journal audiobiographique : radiophonie, arts, cinéma*, Lyon : Nouvelles Editions Scala, 2016
  6. Hegarty, Paul. “Eon Cores Noise Prospecting in A Personal Sonic Geology”, *A Personal Sonic Geology: Mathieu Copeland & Philippe Decrauzat, Op. cit.*, p. 372
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AUTHORS

ANNE ZEITZ

Anna Zeitz is a lecturer at the University Rennes 2. She is a member of the PTAC/Rennes 2 laboratory and an associate member of the TEAMeD/Paris 8 laboratory. Her research deals with the relation between contemporary art, literature and film, as well as socio-political and economic issues—in particular in the field of surveillance and Big Data. As part of a research grant from the INHA (Institut national d’histoire de l’art) and the Institut Français in 2016, she worked on issues involving sonic attention in contemporary art. Let us mention among her recent publications: “Moments d’(in)attention. De la temporalité suspendue chez Max Neuhaus” (*Tacet*, no.4, December 2015), “Visualités, virtualités et trauma – Des temporalités de la guerre à distance”, (*Multitudes*, no.63, July 2016) and “De la base de données à l’amnésie” (Cérisy conference proceedings, to be published in 2019).