

(AUTO) DIALOGICAL FEEDBACK & THE POETICS OF LETTING GO

Mark Peter Wright

CRiSAP (Creative Research
into Sound Arts Practice)
University of the Arts, London

ABSTRACT

This paper relates to a current and ongoing practice based project titled *(Auto) Dialogical Feedback* [20]. The work endeavours to address the “culture of capture” which presides over contemporary field recording practice and discourse. It debates issues of agency, ethics and archival access within the paradigms of personal and institutional contexts. Specifically, the paper explores “re-broadcast” as a methodology within anthropology, science and sound art. Through *(Auto) Dialogical Feedback*, I will propose a counter practice, one that resides within a methodological domain I call: “the poetics of letting go”.

1. INTRODUCTION

For some time I have been re-thinking my relationship to field recording. One of the facets of that re-think surrounds how I access my own archive of recordings. The reality of that issue is fairly simple: I don't. I barely ever think to pull out a hard-drive and listen to its contents. Sound, and with it, contextual time and space, sits silently within a vast invisible storage unit; here the purpose of a recording, appears to reside in collecting digital dust.

So why keep all these auditory inscriptions if I never return to any of them? To feel a sense of personal accumulation? To preserve memories? To prepare for a future sonic apocalypse? Do I hold onto them simply because I can; thanks to the relatively infinite realm of digital space? What are these recordings doing in there? What are the consequences of these sounds going unheard?

2. DIALOGICAL PROCESS

(Auto) Dialogical Feedback is a practice-based project that attempts to address these questions and concerns. The work builds upon sound anthropologist Steven Feld's technique of dialogical editing. Feld began recording in the early 1970's, during his fieldwork in the Bosavi rainforest of Papua New Guinea. Over the following twenty-five years, he continued to return and record the areas environmental sounds, along with the day-to-day practices of its inhabitants: publishing notable works *Sound and Sentiment* [7] and *Voices of the Rainforest* [8]. Feld's work - similar to R. Murray Schafer's with *Soundscape Studies*¹ - affirmed the

validity of sound, as a social and cultural artefact. However, Feld's motivation substituted Schafer's compositional design orientated project, for one based upon experiential collaboration with a place and its people. As Feld calls it, his ‘acoustemological’ practice, ensures he and an environment are continually embroiled in the production of knowledge [5]. He states field recording is an ‘experimental practice, [...] a way of constructing an anthropology of sound, of joining methods of dialogical editing and theories of sound as knowledge production’ [6]. Feld's dialogical method involved re-broadcasting recordings he made - in-situ - to local Kaluli people, whom he would then edit the sounds in collaboration with. His inclusive method also highlights anthropologies larger awareness of its own exclusive history and penchant for authorial abuse [3].

3. RE-BROADCASTING FOR ART

Since the turn of the twentieth century field recording has increasingly moved from science and ethnomusicology traditions, towards an artistic practice in its own right [16]. As sound is gathered in the field, its re-presentation - through installation, publication, playback and performance - has broadened the disciplines reach. Field recording now contributes a key facet within contemporary sound art praxis and discourse [4][10][13]. This context has explored a variety of re-broadcast methods, similar to that of Feld's.

Alvin Lucier is perhaps the most canonical example, widely regarded for his investigation into the physical properties of sound. His now seminal work *I am Sitting in a Room* [14] was for voice and magnetic tape. It consisted of Lucier sat, whilst reading a text that outlined the properties - both spatial and technical - of the room. The script also acted as a set of instructions for which we, the recipients, could then attempt to reproduce in our own rooms, if so desired. Whilst reading the score, Lucier recorded his voice acoustically in space. He would then re-broadcast the recording back into the room and re-record. This process was repeated until Lucier's voice lost its original contours and became melded into the acoustic properties of the space itself. The work is given extra poignancy through Lucier's own voice impediment (stutter), which continually morphs in and out of auditory focus throughout the piece: its erasure, though never quite complete, instead haunts the background of each oscillating surface of the room.

Other art historical examples arrive from the likes of Max Neuhaus's *Drive In Music* [17] and Maryanne Ammacker's *City Links* [1]. Such works extended the complexity of the re-broadcast method

¹ *Soundscape Studies* aimed to raise awareness of the acoustic environment whilst advocating sound design, be readily incorporated into environmental planning agencies and infrastructure [18].

through the live transmission and re-location of specific sound environments, into other historically, or socially resonant spaces. Contemporary variations on the theme include Jacob Kirkegaard's - Lucier inspired - *4 Rooms* [11]. All interestingly fit into what Brandon LaBelle has called a form of 'poetic science' [12].

4. RE-BROADCASTING FOR SCIENCE

Re-broadcasting sound has also been a historic method employed within wildlife recording and bio-acoustics: endeavours rooted to the pursuit of science rather than arts more poetic interpretations. From the 1930's onwards - with the advance of technical capabilities in the field - biologists turned to birdsong in order to study patterns of migration, population and behaviour [2]. A key methodology for both observing and recording birdsong relied upon the aforementioned method of re-broadcast. In this particular instance, pre-recorded birdsong would be played back into an environment. The intention of the technique was to induce a bird into sight and in doing so, solicit new, up-close song patterns for analysis.

The ethics of such a technique are clearly problematic given the real manipulation of a bird's auditory perception. Although notoriously difficult to prove [19], Richard L. Glinski suggested the method might disrupt feeding, mating and nesting patterns [9]. Written through an elitist air of "behavioural etiquette", Glinski's concern ultimately rests in posing questions around the possible ramifications of such playback methods. Be it for aural or visual purposes, is it enough to presume the method is inconsequential?

Applying this directly onto field recording, I would ask: is the practice itself inconsequential? If no "real" consequences of recording seem apparent, then perhaps the language and discourse may offer some insight? How are non-human worlds really being treated if they are continually talked of as being "captured" or "shot"? How are the agency and rights of these subjects negotiated and assigned when displaced into a hard-drive?

5. (AUTO) DIALOGICAL FEEDBACK

My own practice resides in the more artistic end of the field recording and re-broadcast spectrum. Yet sciences early twentieth century legacies of altruism and objective truth, continue to pull at the practices' contemporary heels. The word "preservation" is perhaps most pertinent here. It exerts power and authority: that is why Soundscape Studies has infiltrated bureaucracy on such a widespread level, and why national sound archives exist. In the case of the latter, its function rests in the presupposed future access of such material. For me, an individual artist and neither a national archive nor bio-acoustician, what then am I doing with these recordings once "captured"? What is their purpose and function when displaced within my own digital cell?

(Auto) Dialogical Feedback attempts to develop a personal way of addressing such issues by re-broadcasting the sounds of my own, environmental archive. Through similar processes to those previously

outlined, the methodology involves returning sound's to their place of origin. I play them back into the space, letting then and now mingle and infuse one another. It is during this moment of playback and reception when digital past and present begin to merge. Dwelling in those worlds, I reach a point of aural confluence. It is a contingent apex, one that for a brief moment generates and actively constructs the site anew, both within the environment and myself. When the recording has finished its playback, I move the file into trash and press the "delete permanently" option.



Figure 1. Author re-broadcasting sound back into original environment. Photo: Dr Michael Gallagher.

6. WHY DELETE?

The consequent erasure of material is perhaps where my project departs from earlier examples. Deletion is not something I take lightly. Having built a recording practice over many years, it is painful to let them go, almost funereal. Yet there is closeness achieved in this final act that I will never be privy to, whilst sounds continue to sit mute within a hard-drive. Erasure becomes a poetic, symbolic device, yet one that is also a very real "action-gesture". It leans on a tradition that artist Gustav Metzger has called 'auto-destructive art' [15]. This movement, whereby the artist destroys their own work, challenged hierarchies of power whilst also emphasising the "constructive", or "emergent", as part of that very same process. The point being, that through a seemingly destructive act, new meanings and representations came to the fore. My own project is preoccupied with re-broadcast and erasure as a form of "disruptive reconciliation". Of course field recording never really "captures" anything other than a trace or shadow of the original source. But surely it is ecological to think about the consequences of my own digital footprint, however ambiguous a territory that may be?

I am endeavouring therefore to embrace loss as a creative and contingent method. I hope to open up critical discourse around the culture of "capture" that runs throughout the practice and language of field recording. Through *(Auto) Dialogical Feedback* I want to amplify the entangled ethics and relations of environments, species and technologies, within human and non-human worlds. Ultimately, I want to move towards what I call a "poetics of letting go": a critical and self-reflexive practice of field recording, based upon

an active, participatory and gestural interrogation of place and self.

6. CONCLUSION

I am taking my time with this project. Working slowly and carefully through hard-drives and files. At present the work is beginning to explore the potential of group audiences, perhaps something resembling an alternative performance scenario: one that swaps the conventions of indoor playback for a shared experience, outdoors and within the parameters of the original act. In this - participatory scenario - the overall project would become more located in the social interactions and discussions that would take place, conversations that would exist not just at the site of re-broadcast, but on the journeys prior to and after. Perhaps then the “Auto” within the “Dialogical” could also be discarded?

As an individual artist, I am constantly re-thinking the politics of my practice; how the personal and poetic intersect the critical and contextual. By returning, re-broadcasting and erasing, I may be employing a counter intuitive, reverse methodology for field recording: but in doing so, I hope to be continually listening anew.



Figure 2. Deleting the sound file after re-broadcast.
Photo: Dr Michael Gallagher.

7. REFERENCES

- [1] Ammacher, M. *City links*. 1973-76.
- [2] Bruyninckx, J. *Sound science: recording and listening in the biology of bird song, 1880-1980*. PhD Dissertation. Datawyse, Maastricht, 2013.
- [3] Clifford, J. & Marcus, G.E. (eds) *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987.
- [4] Cox, C. & Warner, D. (eds) *Audio culture: readings in modern music*. Continuum, London, 2002.
- [5] Feld, S. (1994) [Internet] Available from: <<http://www.acousticecology.org/writings/echomuseecology.html>> [Accessed 14th October 2013].
- [6] Feld, S. In Carlyle, A & Lane, C. (eds) *In the field: the art of field recording*. Uniform Books, Devon, 2013, p.208.
- [7] Feld, S. (2nd ed) *Sound and sentiment: birds, weeping, poetics and song in kaluli expression*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1990.
- [8] Feld, S. *Voices of the rainforest*. Smithsonian Folkways, Washington DC, 1991.
- [9] Glinski, R. L. *Birdwatching etiquette: the need for a developing philosophy*. *American Birds* Vol 30 (3) pp.655-657. 1976.
- [10] Kelly, C. (ed) *Sound*. MIT Press, London, 2011.
- [11] Kirkegaard, J. *4 Rooms*. Touch, London, 2008.
- [12] LaBelle, B. *Background noise: perspectives on sound art*. Continuum, London, 2006, p.124.
- [13] Licht, A. *Sound art*. Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 2007.
- [14] Lucier, A. *I am sitting in a room*. 1969.
- [15] Jefferies, S. (2012) [Internet] Available from: <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/nov/26/gustav-metzger-null-object-robot>> [Accessed 14th October 2013].
- [16] Montgomery, W. (2013) [Internet] Available from: <http://thewire.co.uk/in-writing/essays/the-wire-300_will-montgomery-on-the-changing-uses-of-field-recordings> [Accessed 14th October 2013].
- [17] Neuhaus, M. *Drive in music*. 1967.
- [18] Schafer, R. M. *Soundscape: our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Destiny Books, Vermont, 1994.
- [19] Silby, D. (2013) [Internet] Available from: <<http://www.sibleyguides.com/2011/04/the-proper-use-of-playback-in-birding/>> [Accessed 14th October 2013].
- [20] Wright, M. P. *(Auto) Dialogical feedback*. Ongoing.