

Decomposing Landscape: Hearing the Troubled Site

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Abstract

Site-specific sound artworks are developed through location based listening and recordings made at specific places with a particular cultural heritage. The compositional strategy in these works relies on artistic intervention by intricate processes of field recording and processing of recognizable environmental sounds using multi-channel spatialization techniques. The artistic transformation renders these sounds into a blurry area between compositional abstraction and portrayal of their site-based narrative. The question is: how much spatial information is retained and how much abstraction is deployed in these works? In this proposed paper presentation, I discuss my recent multi-channel sound work: *Decomposing Landscape* (2015) to shed light on the specific approaches and the methodology of handling site-specific evidence in sound art production dealing with environmentally troubled heritage sites in India.

Keywords

Sound Art, Media Production, Landscape, Heritage, Ambience, Sitespecificity, ambient sound, Artistic Transformation, Mediation.”

Introduction

As a practitioner of sound art I am involved with “field recording,” a practice that embraces the methodology of recording site-specific ambient sounds outside of the studio. The practice is also known as “phonography” – a term used to signify its similarity to photography. Field recording was originally developed as part of a documentary approach in anthropological field research; it also stands analogous to location recording in filmmaking, albeit being largely controlled by the predominant narrative strategies of cinema. With the introduction of high-quality portable recording technologies after the digital revolution in the nineties, it has subsequently become an independent and evocative art form in itself within the realm of sound art and new music. The current avatar of field recording often involves capturing environmental sounds, which might range from animal sounds from the remote corners of

the wilderness to everyday urban sounds, subliminal in apprehension and low frequency in content; therefore, the sonic material tends to be complex in texture, tone and characteristics. In response, artists have often pushed the technical capabilities of sound recording, demanding low noise and extended frequency response in portable, easy-to-use recording equipment, ranging from high-resolution multitrack recording kits to the DIY technologies of contact microphones, for example. The arrival of digital technology actually made such recording techniques and methods possible. Hence, we can observe that the digital era has turned out to be an ideal situation for the emergence of field recording-based sound art, enabling diverse approaches to documenting sound from a site. Parallel developments also occurred within sound production practices in the context of fiction films; however, in the scope of this paper I will focus on examining non-fiction field recording-based sound artworks due to their unique contribution to the issues of spatial evidence and presence. Drawing on a few more recent scholarly works on field recording (Demers, 2010; Gallagher, 2015), I intend to discuss one of my recent multi-channel sound compositions: *Decomposing Landscape* (Chattopadhyay, 2015), in order to underscore the complex and evolving relationship between sound and site that is thoroughly challenged in the practice of field recording or phonography-based sound artworks and digital music compositions created with site-specific recordings of ambient sound from endangered sites.

The Discourse

In a recent essay, Australian sound artist Lawrence English enquired into the current flux of field recording practice: “Why has it become a substantial presence in the contemporary sound ecologies? Merely two decades ago it was a somewhat uncharted realm lacking vigorous and pluralistic investigations” (English, 2014). To answer this question, I draw attention to the condition of

contemporary media art since the dust of the digital era has settled. I argue that, following the advent of digital technology in the late 90s, widely available and easy-to-handle digital sound recording devices, applications and facilities made various options and formats available to contemporary sound practitioners. Field recording based sound technologies, as a sprawling field in the realm of contemporary art practices, facilitate the recording of sound on location with greater detail, deeper depth of field, and wider dynamic range of frequency, resulting in more precise, controlled and accurate documentary evidence of the site. These recording capabilities allow for a closer listening to and more accurate sonic documentation of uncharted territories, including underwater and underground locations, in the Amazonian forests, arctic landscapes, and even in outer space. Contemporary sound practice is marked by conditions where the digital saturates itself to give birth to a new context of “post-digital” (Cascone, 2002; Chattopadhyay, 2014; Cramer, 2014 et al.) practices, intensifying technological convergence, aesthetic inclusivity, a sense of democratization, and artistic freedom. In this post-digital era, field recording is amply supported by the development of kits with multitrack recording options, offering greater flexibility, access to the farthest corners of the location, and applications with precise control over each recorded audio clip. Multiple options for saving numerous tracks open up possibilities for recording a larger number of sound elements and working with multiple layers of sound captured from a location. In the studio scenario, there are ample choices for processing sounds (digitally or with retro-aesthetic means, e.g. analogue synthesizers) for spatialization and multichannel composition. But it is not the availability of the tools of music technologies and the way in which this has impacted the proliferation of field recording in sound-based artistic production that I focus on in this article. My interest in this paper presentation lies in examining the nature of the site -specific sound contents that are recorded and used in field recording based sound artworks and the ramifications of the post-digital approach on the handling of audible evidence derived from culturally rich sites or landscapes that are environmentally and climatically endangered within rapidly emerging economies, such as that of India, landscapes that are underrepresented in popular mainstream film and media productions.

The Context

We have arguably entered the Anthropocene epoch, a new geologic era defined by unprecedented manmade disturbances over earth’s ecologies (Morton, 2013). In this era, the ecological integrity of natural, pastoral landscapes in emerging economies like India are endangered due to governmental pressure for rapid growth. Under the specter of the contemporary conditions of anthropogenic climate change in these developing economies, the actual environments of the various rural sites and pastoral landscapes are undergoing massive environmental transformation. Contemporary India is going through an intensifying process of land development to facilitate rapid urbanization (McKinsey, 2010). As a result of this speedy manmade growth, many of the greener pastures in the rural hinterlands are developing into post-industrial zones, deeply impacting the integrity of the environmental as well as socio-cultural climate. Consequently, these scenic landscapes are transmuting to become homogenized wastelands, with complex transitions unfolding within their traditionally rich culture and history. In India there are numerous such sites that are going through an intense cross-fertilization between multi-layered development processes within traditionally integrated rural areas, impacting the natural landscapes suffused with their own unique site -specific heritage. Some of these transitory landscapes are exposed to phonographic fieldwork as sites for investigation through the development of diegetic narratives in sound art and compositions.

The Work

In this context, multi-channel sound composition *Decomposing Landscape* (Chattopadhyay, 2015) developed through extensive field recordings made at specific sites situated at the eastern part of India, close to the city of Kolkata. The work creates a discursive auditory setting to facilitate a contemplative and indepth observation of transitive landscapes. The final outcome of the project includes an Ambisonics sound composition – site-specific field recordings arranged and diffused through multi-channel spatialization – as well as a multi-channel sound/video installation. The works have been developed through a meticulous collection of materials from various locations of India during extensive phonographic fieldworks. This collection formed a digital archive used to realize the work. The project aims to share an aesthetic interpretation of the

gradual transfiguration of the developing societies to the wider public, employing post-digital music technology with a hybrid methodology, marked by a technological convergence between old and new applications; aesthetic inclusivity, combining retro and current techniques of sound processing; and artistic freedom in arranging sound through the wider spatial environment of an Ambisonics system. The multi-channel sound composition was developed during an artist residency at ICST, Zurich University of the Arts and, upon completion, received first prize in the Computer and Electronic Music category of Computer Space festival, Sofia, Bulgaria in 2014¹ and was subsequently released by Touch, London, in 2015.² In this work the sonic representation of the specific sites tends to aestheticize the actual environment of the landscape in the creative process of spatial composition developed while listening and gathering field recordings of site-specific ambient sounds. The compositional strategy consists of artistic interventions: taking intricate location-based multi-track digital field recordings and transforming these recognizable environmental sounds through studio processing. These artistic mediations diffuse these sounds spatially into a blurry area between musical abstraction and recognizable sonic evidence of the site. The question is, how much spatial information, in terms of the recorded ambient sounds, is retained and how much artistic abstraction is deployed during production practice? This artistic process needs to be examined in order to better understand the nature of representation in field recording-based sound artworks that intend to diegetically narrate the traditionally ingrained heritage sites endangered by anthropogenic interferences.

The Analysis

As it develops, the 35-minute long piece deliberately turns from the recognizable textures and tones of ambient sounds in the first 15 minutes to become steadily more abstract.³ As I have mentioned, the work draws on field recordings collected from a specific environmentally troubled site in eastern India as its primary material.

¹ See: http://www.seas.acad.bg/cs2014/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=146%3Acomputer-space-2014-awarded-projects&catid=1%3Alatest-news&Itemid=67&lang=en

² See: http://touchshop.org/product_info.php?cPath=113&products_id=693

³ Excerpts from the composition: <https://soundcloud.com/budhadiya/decomposing-landscape-excerpts>

The field recordings are already “composed” on site, as Sound Studies scholar Joanna Demers has shown. Phonography-based sound works are developed from documentary field recordings, which are collected from certain sites and landscapes, employing the act of recording as the primary compositional process (Demers, 2010). Sound artist Yan Jun addresses this purer approach of field recording in the phonography-based sound art production by stating that: “There is no divide between documenting and creating. The point is that, I do not build dreams, neither by field recording nor by playing my electronic instruments or digital audio workstation at the laptop computer. To choose the right equipment, to choose the right recording position and to push the record button are the acts of composing. A recording of tiny meaningless noises can be a beautiful composition” (Jun quoted in English, 2014). However, there are works that use digital mediation as their primary compositional strategy: using musical techniques such as signal synthesis, looping, and so on. This strategy relies heavily on the processing of recognizable environmental sounds recorded from the sites, using effects like delay and modulation, a methodology that follows the example of composer Barry Truax (1996). When analyzing the methodology employed, “Decomposing Landscape” falls into the latter category of sound artworks, however, at places I choose to reproduce recurring motifs in the form of unprocessed, site-based field recordings. My intent with this deliberate interplay between audible site-specific evidence that is recognizable or made abstract should be justified, since the ecologically-disturbed and polluted sites, as the subject of the work, might be viewed as asking for a more truthful (i.e. less manipulated) documentation of the anthropogenic interference in the landscape, as demanded by the notions of acoustic ecology and soundscape (Novak and Sakakeeny, 2015), marked by an environmental concern.

Earlier scholars writing on sound recording have discussed the process of recording in terms of dislocating sounds from their respective sources and the sites of their origin. Both Rick Altman and R. Murray Schafer have spoken about the ways in which recording displaces sounds in time (Schafer, 1994; Altman, 2012). Field recording of site-specific ambient sound, therefore, can be considered as a process that develops a repository of sonic events recorded from the site that can be brought into the realm of composition as sound objects (Demers,

2010; Metz, 1980). Following this, it can be argued that phonography-based composition stems from both site-specific sound recording – “field recording” – and the subsequent studio processing of the gathered artistic material: recorded and disembodied ambient sounds. It remains to be seen as to what degree sound becomes disembodied during the recording process as well as how much abstraction is further imposed on this sound due to the compositional method applied during the production of the sound art. Does the strategy of musical and artistic mediation that is applied distort the audible evidence of the field recordings collected from ecologically disturbed sites with deeply held cultural heritage?

The work begins with unprocessed ambient sounds of birds, insects and traffic from a distant landscape within a spatial perspective of a wide expanse.⁴ This shorter passage is invaded by the unedited sounds of flying bees in spatial diffusion with intensifying proximity and volume, creating a dramatic auditory setting. A slow intrusion of the sounds of cattle bells follows, bringing in subtle musical textures that gradually grow incessantly rhythmic and spatially enveloping. Unprocessed sounds of machineries appear from distant corners and take over the environment. The sound of machineries is intercepted by the rhythms of the ritual drums played at this tribal-dominated site perhaps contributing to the notion of “sounded anthropology” (Feld & Basso, 1996; Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa and Porcello, 2010). The machineries dissolve into a ritual chant, which gradually morphs into an “echoing chamber where all is erased and [...] left (with) dark brushes of sound enveloping the landscape.”⁵ This last part of the composition becomes heavily processed as time passes, employing tools such as delay, compression, time-stretching and spatialization with multiple audio applications, simulating varied sonic textures using styles from the most recent digital to earlier analogue eras. The piece continues with increasingly modulated abstract textures and ends with the climactic sound of an actual blast occurring at the center of the landscape, opening up the earth and extensively destroying the nature, as suggested through the development of the piece.

⁴ Excerpts: <https://soundcloud.com/budhaditya/decomposing-landscape-excerpts>

⁵ Review of the piece by sound artist and writer Maria Papado-manolaki in a personal email (2015).

The work’s compositional strategy of presenting the unprocessed ambient sounds in the beginning and then gradually turning them into processed sonic textures of ambient electronic music (Demers, 2010) essentially blurs the boundaries between the documentary actualities of the site and the subsequent artistic mediation, turning this process into a musical composition. The strategy of this deliberate but gradual transformation problematizes the nature of representation in a field recording-based sound art production, underscoring the work’s precarious relationship to the site. Particularly when the site in question is environmentally endangered, and thus perhaps seeming to demand an accurate documentation, the question arises: why would such a compositional strategy be undertaken?

Many field recording-based sound artworks such as “soundscape compositions” are, according to sound art historian Alan Licht, “a variant of *musique concrète* in which field recordings were electronically processed to some degree but fundamentally left recognisable” (Licht, 2009, p. 8). These works therefore tend not to obscure site-specific information “through a superimposition of sound that interpenetrates preexisting spaces, effecting a layering or doubling, which can produce hybrid spaces” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 574). In such artistic processes, the auditory evidence is kept in an ambivalent state, leaving questions concerning the degree of abstraction that the production of sound art generates. Based on the chosen compositional methods in sound artworks developed from field recordings, it can be contended that, in general, the work exists in a state of tension between the abstract and the evidential, subsequently suggesting a manipulation of recorded sonic “facts” within its speculative form of composition. The ways in which this distinction is maintained traces the nebulous line between abstraction and recognition. The processes of abstraction achieved through musical mediation (manipulations achieved digitally or with retro-aesthetic means, e.g. analogue processing of sound) and multi-channel composition collide with the evidential accounts of the field recording.

The diegetic world within the composition appears by means of the sites and their respective actual environments as represented within the sonically augmented environment of the piece. From the production end, if I link my art practice to the reception of the work through speculating on the expectations of the audience or, more precisely, by placing myself as the

first audience member of my artwork, I can contend that the audience members might involve themselves with the work by recognizing a sort of presence of the site within the contested diegetic narrative captured within this constructed world. The embodied experience of presence may vary in degree, depending on the intention of the artist in terms of which ambient sonic details of the sites are recorded and represented during the compositional process. The audience members would believe in and associate with the diegetic world (Percheron, 1980; Burch, 1982) when a resonance of the sites reverberates while experiencing the works. The representation of the site within the composed environments of phonography-based sound artworks are of significance when it comes to convincingly conveying the narratives of the actual sites and the landscapes to the audience: “Truax has noted that soundscape composition simulates a journey, or motion, through a landscape” (Licht, 2009, p. 8). The spatial organization of field recordings of ambient sounds in higher order Ambisonics format intends to create a spatially augmented environment realized through the narrative progression of the composition. The aesthetic experience of perceiving a culturally rich landscape in this sound work is crafted by recorded materials assembled with a narrative musical structure in mind. The strategic combination of recognizable unedited ambient sounds and processed phonographic materials is designed to suggest the development of a fertile interaction between the relative presence and absence of documentary evidence of this troubled site, which, within this constructed interplay, engages the audience’s interest and attention over time. Perhaps a mere factual representation of the site in unedited field recordings would not appeal to the audience’s contemplative associations. The extent to which audiences associate with the sites and how engaged they become while following the artistic transformation of field recordings, both in terms of compositional techniques as well as the Ambisonics spatialization of the ambient sounds, depends on the framing of this constructive interplay between absence and presence or between abstraction and recognition of the site-specific evidence during the temporal development of the composition. In the work *Decomposing Landscape* I have aimed at amplifying the imaginary outlines of the landscape by shifting attention between the concrete and the abstract.

Conclusion

The process of artistic transformation using multi-channel compositional techniques reproduces the field recordings from the culturally rich heritage sites troubled by man-made interference, within an augmented environment, formulating its narrative diegesis by operating between an abstraction from and reproduction of their sited source. The degree of artistic transformation depends on the amount of spatial information retained from the unedited field recordings as well as the processing that is deployed. The resulting tension, as explained above, may help engage the audience members, who might not otherwise lend their ears to a purely documentary representation of the site. In this paper I underscore such tension between offering an evidential account, through the use of unedited and relatively unprocessed field recordings, and an abstraction of ambient sounds, brought in through technology-based artistic interventions and transformation. In my assessment as a sound artist and researcher, this inherent tension makes the work more engaging.

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Author Biography

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay is an Indian-born media artist, researcher, writer and theorist. Chattopadhyay’s work questions the materiality, site-specificity and objecthood of sound, and addresses the aspects of contingency, contemplation, mindfulness and transcendence inherent in listening. His artistic practice intends to shift the emphasis from “object” to “situation” in the realm of sound. His soundworks are published by Gruenrekorder (Germany) and Touch (UK). Chattopadhyay is a Charles Wallace scholar, Prince Claus grantee and Falling Walls fellow, and has received several residencies and international awards, notably a First Prize in Computer and Electronic Music category of Computer Space festival 2014, Sofia, and an Honorary Mention at PRIX Ars Electronica 2011, Linz. Chattopadhyay graduated from the national film school of India specializing in sound, completed a Master of Arts degree in new media/sound art at Aarhus University, Denmark, and obtained a PhD degree in sound studies, involving artistic research from Leiden University, Netherlands.