Title

Sounds nothing like the sea

Authors

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Abstract

A short text and an online player present live sounds from the Pacific Ocean, discovered in the course of the Reveil 24 hour radio broadcast over 2 to 3 May 2015. Reveil follows the dawn chorus around the world via live audio feeds provided by a dispersed community of streamers. Travelling at the speed of the earth's rotation at its surface, which is also the apparent speed of daybreak, it takes about 4 1/2 hours to cross the Pacific, from the time you leave the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains at the ocean, to landfall on the island of Tabushima. Coming to the beach with workaday expectations of what the ocean will be like, in the course of a long and monotonous passage on hydrophones and remote radio intercepts, we chart our emerging sense of a more elusive and intriguing sonic object.

Link to online piece

http://soundtent.org/on_at_sea/on_at_sea_working.html

Full Text

When we started researching the Reveil 24 hour radio broadcast, which follows daybreak around the world on live audio streams, we knew that the stretches of open water corresponding to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans were going to be an issue for us, in terms of filling air time. We hoped that at the edges of the land we would discover marine soundscapes quite different from the terrestrial biomes we were familiar with: open and shifting, evocative of the depth, fluidity and immensity of the sea, as observed from a beach, pier or similar vantage point.

Joyce (1922) famously refers to a jetty as a disappointed bridge. And our initial attempts to assemble compelling and varied live audio from marine environments immediately ran into some obstacles: in the same way you can only hear the wind when it encounters vegetation or other barriers, the sea is mainly audible where it hits the beach, the rocks or some piling or vessel. Even these sounds are quite hard to convey: recordings of water seeming rich and varied in situ often sound like white noise on playback. (Neuhaus: 1994)

Hydrophones, directly inserted in the water for sounding at depth, don't sound anything like the sea as we first expect: rather than fluid, sinuous, recalling water, the sounds are typically austere, machinic in quality with restricted tonal ranges, tight repetitive rhythms, often heavily marked by boat engine and other anthropogenic sound, even in apparently remote locations. And there are very few listening points: perhaps a dozen hydrophones online and working. The shallowness of the sample contrasts with the sea's proverbial open vastness, just as the process of traversing this non terrain substitutes gestures of mouse and keyboard along a land locked digital surface (Toop: 1995) for hopes of body surfing and sounding the deep.

Many of the streams also come and go: we keep missing the Humpbacked Whales at Puako, Hawaii or the Streaked Shearwaters on Tabushima island, because of bad weather or technical problems, or because they have simply moved on, leaving a faint bow wash, buzz or silence. It takes about two hours to cross the Atlantic, where open water extends from pole to pole, or four hours to cross that section of the Pacific where live audio feeds are restricted to hydrophones and intercepts of fragments of conversation between air traffic controllers and pilots making their approach to land.

Despite being curtailed by comparison with the extent of water on the planet, these stretches seem very long, especially on live radio. The sense of time changes: we stop expecting novelty or readily identifiable signifiers: sea gulls, fog horns. In the deep ocean sonic landmarks disappear, a kind of tedium familiar from long journeys settles on the listener, who drowses, with ambiguous feelings of suspension bordering on nausea. We worry as we watch listener after listener drop off the server.

After some minutes, then tens of minutes, even hours of listening to hydrophones, the persistent listener can in fact recalibrate and begin to discover nuances and shifts which become curiously compelling, if stark; while the poverty of the resources encourages the artists to improvise, mixing and layering the streams, creating temporal folds (Connor, 2002). Time in the open ocean seems to be revealed, undecorated, while conventional representation is suspended. This colours the way we hear the next 12 hours, notwithstanding our eventual relief at returning to familiar sounds of land: bird calls from Brisbane, radio static from Wellington, traffic and wind from Jeju island.

Instead of a cluster of marine metaphors, the ocean sequences set up a connection that is at once more abstract and more finite. This doesn't sound like the sea; and: if this is what the sea sounds like, the sea is something different from what we were expecting. This strangeness emerges at the intersection of very specific geographical, technical, organisational and perceptual conditions: this isn't The Sea but a hydrophone on a specific buoy set up by a specific operator tuned to certain frequencies. This combination of very specific conditions and acts of listening, and a concomitant strangeness at the heart of everyday objects, as revealed by crossing the oceans, is characteristic of what we call the live audio archive.

References

Connor, Steven, 2002: 'Michel Serres's Milieux' [http://stevenconnor.com/milieux.html]

Joyce, James, 1922: Ulysses (Paris : Shakespeare & Co.; Sylvia Beach) p. 25.

Neuhaus, Max, 1994: 'Sound Design' in Zeitgleich: the Symposium, the Seminar, the Exhibition. Vienna: Triton, [http://www.max-neuhaus.info/soundworks/vectors/invention/sounddesign/Sound_Design.pdf]

Toop, David, 1995: Ocean of sound : aether talk, ambient sound and imaginary worlds (London : Serpent's Tail).

Image Caption

Radius Soundcamp 2 May 2015

Pinhole by Ky Lewis

Biography

SoundCamp is a London based arts collective founded in December 2013. Our practice focuses on environmental, social and personal ecologies and their intersections. We work intensively with live audio streaming and radio to bring dispersed locations together in real time, and shift perceptions of place, time and species.

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