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Lago

Joshua Bonnetta

2017, sound installation, 44 min., English. **Dialog editor** Josh Berger.
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The multi-channel sound installation *Lago* was produced in dialogue with the photobook of the same title by the American photographer Ron Jude. It is comprised of two musique concrète compositions constructed from site-specific field recordings from the sites of Jude's initial photographs in and around the Salton Sea in the Southern California Sonoran Desert. Contact microphones and hydrophones were used to gather sounds from flora, desert refuse, architectural ruins, and the Salton Sea itself to create an expanded study of the acoustic ecology of the Sonoran Desert. The materials were later processed and reworked with analogue tape to reveal hidden sounds and patterns within initial materials. The compositions weave together site-specific recordings with interviews to construct an acoustic portrait of the desert that is steeped in intimations of narrative. *Lago* is an attempt to document the perceptual encounter of the desert while engaging a past that shapes the encounter.

Interview with Joshua Bonnetta Index of Possibilities

When did you start writing/producing music – and what or who were your early passions and influences?

I took a physics of sound course during my undergraduate studies, and when we got to constructive interference it was a revelatory moment for me to realize that sound waves could have all these complex properties interacting with one another and in interacting with spaces. I began to understand that there could be a potential in sound as something other than musical, and that its relation to things like architecture and material could be used to reciprocally explore space and environment. At the time I had mostly been with working with video signal and had been lurking around the physics department trying to get some advice from the engineers on how not to get electrocuted taking apart CRT televisions. I ended up collaborating with an engineer on modifying a CRT with bespoke electromagnets we made to manipulate video signal. We needed something to drive the magnets and ended up using signal generators. I found these devices fascinating, that you could precisely generate specific frequencies to the exact hertz. I ended up patching one of these into an amplifier one day and just became intrigued with this pure waveform and was captivated.

I began building composite tones, acquiring a volume and looping pedal and exploring relationships between layered tones to perpetuate all sorts of different interference, harmonics and resonances. I was working as a film projectionist for a university and was able to set up a workspace behind the screen to use afterhours and this led to the opportunity to experiment with interference, feedback, and rerecording in a specific environment. It was both a lecture hall and cinema space so the acoustics were not dead. Figuring out how sound was contoured in a particular environment became an obsession of sorts and as the building was closed at night it became fun to try and play the building, make things rattle and whatnot. I was able to work with volume, duration and to explore sounds in the environment of the cinema space which was important for me later on. I spent an enormous amount of time listening within/to that environment. It was a formative experience and a time that I had to dedicate to pure experimentation. I would document the experiments on tapes but there was never an intention to release any material from this, and although I was making films and video work then, I wasn't interested in marrying the two at the time. These experiments didn't end up linking to other parts of my art practice until later on, but it was the start to record and document experiments, working from improvisation and using process and experimentation to generate material.

As cinematic influences go, structural films from the 1960s-1970s were influential in expanding my thinking about cinematic sound. Works like Paul Sharit's *Ray Gun Virus* or *Shutter Interface*, Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, Hollis Frampton's in (*nostalgia*), and much of the Austrian work from the 1990s, Peter Tscherkassky and Martin Arnold.

Seeing/hearing this work helped me imagine different possibilities and strategies to use sound in relation to the

image. It wasn't just about a spatial enhancement of the screen space, or decorative sound with no actual aesthetic/conceptual connection to the image, these were works with sound that could actually imbue the image with additional meaning, invoke a conceptual approach, challenge representation in the image; works that strove to have a balance or reciprocal connection between sound and image in a critically and aesthetically engaged way. [...]

Could you describe your creative process on the basis of a piece or album that's particularly dear to you, please? Where do ideas come from, what do you start with and how do you go about shaping these ideas?

My ideas come about through an ongoing synthesis of research and curiosity. I get obsessed with many things at a time and a project ends up weaving itself out of all these different threads. Things reveal themselves over time through the process of making and experimentation. The more I take in, the more ideas I tend to have as the more things that bump around will eventually start to coalesce. An idea will emerge from a constellation of things that sometimes over years will begin to resonate.

I have a new album, *Lago*, out with Shelter Press that is a collaboration with the American photographer Ron Jude. This was an entirely different experience than how I normally work, as I don't collaborate often, and it was an opportunity to respond to someone else's work. There was a sense of responding to someone else's process, which was exciting because I knew I would learn a lot from this, especially from an artist that has been practicing so long.

Ron had created a photo project over the course of five years that documents an area in and around the Salton Sea in California that he has a connection with personally. I had never been to California or any desert for that matter so I was encountering an environment that my understanding of had been shaped entirely from cinema, literature, and history. So initially the work began by studying the sound design for films set in the desert and what the soundscape was. Not in the sense that I would discover the acoustic ecology of this environment from this research but I was interested in familiarizing myself with the cinematic tropes as a kind of ballast to be aware of how my own understanding of these environments had been shaped. You encounter places, even places you've never been, with so much baggage that a framing already exists. This project became an extension of my recent work in a sense that I'm interested in how our phenomenological encounter of place is shaped by the past.

Ron and I logged a lot of miles on that trip and in between sites it became a dialogue about photography in general and photographic montage in book form. I was trying to understand that in relation to cinema and sound design.

There is a certain intimation of narrative threads within the photographs themselves and I thought it would be an opportunity to explore this within the compositions, which I haven't done so overtly before. The photos and geography became a form of conceptual notation and we visited as many of the sites as he could remember.

After capturing the sounds it became an attempt to try and respond to this photographic montage in book form, and find the parallels in sound design and between the photobook and LP format. I was looking at these visual elements and structures trying to find resonances and aesthetic counterpoints with the sounds. It was a nice opportunity for us both to expand our works outside the space of our respective framings; in this case both works kind of cast a shadow into/onto the other that we were both excited about. [...]

How do you see the relationship between sound, space, and composition and what are some of your strategies and approaches of working with them?

Sound and space directly determine composition in my practice. Sound design in narrative cinema is partially the art of effectively modeling illusory acoustics. The cinema environment is designed to possess no acoustic signature, as to not interfere with the illusion of the film world, so when creating sound for the cinema you are creating a whole world that is being hosted within that particular environment with no intent to react to the architecture, acoustics, or material.

Dealing with the cinema space is additionally complicated as there is a long-standing, almost holy tradition within avant-garde film to have no sonic accompaniment with films. It works well for some films, but I am definitely not opposed to having sound with image and I think it's a bit of a misconception that you can even have a silent film. It might be a dead space acoustically but it's still a space that's full of sound. There are bodies and the noises that come with them, ventilation systems, humming of safety lights, the projection booth, ambient sounds from outside etc. It's like a poor anechoic chamber, but instead of hearing the sounds of your central nervous system or blood pumping through your veins, it's the sound of someone's digestion or nose whistling. Having a space that has spectators uncomfortably rooted in their body in a dead acoustic environment is something that feels awkward and unintended to me. I like the timeless/spaceless possibility that using sound in active environments opens up and I've been working to try and move away from the theatre space for some time.

On the other hand, I create work for installation and the gallery environment, which generally speaking is not designed with architectural acoustics in mind. This presents an entire other sound design challenge: creating works for site-specific environments. Working with a custom environment possesses obvious challenges, but it's something I am learning to deal with and playing within those spaces adds a new element to the work.

So essentially sound and its relationship to space, in my practice, is both about controlling acoustics as well as modeling acoustics. [...]

Excerpts from Lara Cory: "Fifteen Questions Interview with Joshua Bonnetta: Index of Possibilities," URL: <http://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-joshua-bonnetta/page-1/>

Joshua Bonnetta, born in 1979 in Canada, works with analogue film and sound presented in various modes of theatrical exhibition, performances, and installation. Bonnetta is an associate professor for Film and Video Art and Sound Art at Ithaca College in New York State. He lives in New York City.

Films (selection)

2002: *Cathode Aurora* (video installation, 6 min.). 2004: *Patchwork* (film installation), *First Snow* (2 min.), *November Light* (2 min.). 2007: *By Grace* (3 min.). 2009: *Parting* (film and video installation). 2010: *Long Shadows* (12 min.). 2012: *American Color* (video installation, 25 min., Forum Expanded 2012), *Remanence I – (Lost, Lost, Lost, Lost)* (2 min., Forum Expanded 2013). 2013: *Strange Lines and Distances* (video installation, Forum Expanded 2013). 2016: *Lanterna* (installation). 2017: *Land of Thin Air* (video installation), *Low Islands* (film installation, 65 min.), *El mar la mar* (94 min., Forum 2017), *Lago*.