

Integrated Circuits

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I first experienced Yolande Harris's work at the Sonic Acts XIII festival in Amsterdam, 2010 and was struck by its boldness - the video work, Pink Noise in particular. Here she was, tackling head on the anthropogenic noise pollution of oceans and rivers, just the sounds I'd been avoiding in my underwater recordings on the Danube, a few years earlier. "Yes", I thought then, "that's the necessary next step," the next stage in acknowledging and reckoning with "the ongoing transformation of the environment through human intervention", as she defines it in the abstract of her paper 'Scorescapes: On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness'.

Her concept of techno-intuition, "combining technical and intuitive methods of knowing" is most timely, as tools for recording environmental processes (as data) and sensory experiences (as visual and aural impressions) are becoming ever more accessible and seductive without necessarily replacing direct experience. I observed a demonstration of the compatibility of these perceptual modes recently, while standing with a group of Audubon members by the Flathead River in Montana at dusk. We were watching three bat specialists delicately extricate several bats from mist nets which they had set up in order to get an idea of which species frequent the area, check individual's weight and age etc., this being a year in which the insect populations on which they feed were really impacted by the hot dry weather and bats are starving in some areas. Several people were tracking the shifting bat numbers on iPods and iPads, using an "app" that also indicated the pitch bands and intensity of the bats' ultrasonic calls. The app was fun to follow, but I was struck by the nice balance watchers showed between tracking the bats by eye and by iPod, with the eyes perhaps winning.

Other than listening to the agitated bats' rapid clicking sounds as they were being freed from the nets, we naturally heard nothing of their striking ultrasonic echolocation calls however. It was like being deaf, able to track their swift acrobatic dance but not hear the 'channel' which guided it. However, through ultrasound recording devices, and transposing software, we can now hear how intricate those calls are.

Realms of sound outside the range of our natural, unmediated hearing, and thus our conscious experience, have fascinated Yolande Harris for a number of years. "Range" has a broad meaning for her, spanning underwater environments and satellite navigation data converted into sound for example, two geographic extremes, but also sound created in the treatment of PTSD, all three of which are interleaved in her audio/visual work *Fishing for Sound* (2010). The radical juxtaposition of these three apparently separate realms suggests all sorts of connections between them as I listen and watch. I'm not only drawn into the lovely sensual world of her imagery, sonic and visual, but more critically, to the intuition that these phenomena are indeed all interconnected. Critical, because that sense of interconnection is, I think, the essential bedrock of environmentalist action and lies at the core of much of her work, expressed in both her art and her research: "... increasing auditory awareness of one's environment promotes a sense of belonging, environmental stewardship, and engagement" (Harris, 2015).

Taking us into remote environments through the medium of various technologies, she invites us to move through them mentally, with a fresh awareness sparked by the juxtaposition of opposites, by displacement. Thus the voices of marine mammals guide individual listeners on a sound walk through desert terrain in *Whale Walk*, a startling juxtaposition which "asks us to imagine connections to environments that are remote but nevertheless essentially connected via global climate systems and ancient imaginings" (Harris, 2015). Their convergence in the body via technology completes the circuit. Audio-visual technology is how many of us experience the world's environments and phenomena - a form of displacement in itself - but the body is truly the connective, malleable medium, and Harris's sounds and camera movements affect us physiologically and emotionally, perhaps below the level of consciousness.

The experience of being completely present and aware in a place is liberating. Artists are devising many techniques for inducing it us but the many ways in which built spaces frame a work can suck the juice out of that illusion. Harris acknowledges this problem: Rather than attempting

to enhance a sense of immersion by eliminating ambient light sources, for example, she gently lights the room itself, reminding visitors of the dual experiential space – gallery and video overlaid. This creates a paradox, a little tension in the body: we are aware of the displacement of environment and time when we watch and listen to a work such as *Tropical Storm* (2009), but are simultaneously seeking to break out of that framing into the turbulent space of great energies, which she presents so vividly in this work, to be within it.

There is an ongoing discussion in the practice of field recording: Should the listener be made aware of the recordist's presence in the recording itself, or is it acceptable to avoid those little give-away sounds altogether in the interests of a listener's deeper absorption? My own feeling is that the technology of recording and reproduction is so familiar by now that its agency is taken for granted by listeners, and need not be acknowledged explicitly, returning the emphasis to what is being recorded and to our experience of listening deeply. However I would be curious to participate in Harris's *Displaced Sound Walks*, which focus strongly on the physical activity of the recordist in three different modes: listening to sounds clues for navigating through a particular route as you walk, sensing the changing space while recording; listening back to that soundscape as a thing in itself; finally the mentally disjunctive experience of playing the recording back while once again walking that route, with its now-changed sonic mix – a disorienting experience. This structure returns the emphasis to the recordist's body, but from a much expanded and useful perspective, grounded in a conscious awareness of listening as a process and of its importance as we move through physical space, not to mention revealing the subtle slippage of sound-memory.

So the Möbius strip of expanding awareness moves out from one's own body to immediate place, to other phenomena, on to remote environments and back to the self in Harris's rich body of thought and art. These are powerful works, in concept and realization. The sense of interdependence which they evoke and encourage is vital to our transformation into good stewards of our environmental neighborhoods.

Yolande Harris, *Leonardo Abstract Services* 2-10-2012

Yolande Harris, 'Listening to the Ocean in the Desert'. Paper delivered at the Balance-Unbalance International Conference: Water, Climate and Place, Re-imagining Environments, Arizona State University 2015.