

Listening to the Distance with Yolande Harris: Techno-Intuition, Sonic Consciousness, and Alternative Ways of Knowing

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In *Listening to the Distance*, Yolande Harris transports us to her magical world of techno-intuition and expanded sonic consciousness, where getting lost is at least as important as knowing where we are, where sound and image mix in unpredictable but profoundly insightful ways. As she guides us through scorescapes in the environment, navigating by circles, sextants, and GPS, we tune in and space out on the presentness of sound. The artist has a truly extraordinary sense of space, of location and navigation, of environment; so wherever she happens to be significantly impacts her work, often becomes a driving force for it. *Listening to the Distance* is inspired by remarkable sites that Yolande and I have called home in recent years: Amsterdam, the Balearic Islands, the Mississippi Delta, the Sonoran Desert, the Pacific Northwest. The land and the landscape, the sea and the seascape, our relationship to the environment and to other life-forms that inhabit it - these are the raw materials of Yolande's artistic practice. She approaches them with an unerring ear and eye, joining image and sound, video and music, in an evocative counterpoint that plays the human off of the non-human and the beautiful off of the sublime. She has purposely honed her sensitivity to her environment through a focused, dreamlike artistic process of meditation and creation. By unifying this sensitivity and process, she has developed the uncanny ability to penetrate the surface and reveal truths that are hidden below, to question instrumental applications of technology, to expand our consciousness and (re)sensitize us to the environment. Her work helps us become aware of and extend our own techno-intuition, in which understanding is inevitably mediated by technology but not beholden to it. *Listening to the Distance* constitutes a certain culminating point in Yolande's artistic journey of heightened sensitivity to and empathy for her environment, for the environment.

Upon entering *Listening to the Distance*, we are drawn to multiple works simultaneously. First, we are beckoned forth by *Pink Noise*, a large, shimmering pink and turquoise floor projection that is visible from the glass entranceway. While approaching it, an even larger wall projection with electronic sound, *Eagle*, lures us in another direction.

The exhibition title text and beside it a tall, spot-lit black and white wall-drawing entitled Mississippi Tornado, pull us in yet another way. Set in a Plexiglas vitrine, Whale Walk might elude notice altogether, even though it, too, is visible from the entranceway. Comprised of open-ear headphones and an integrated audio player with field recordings of humpback whales, Whale Walk can be worn during our stroll through the exhibition - its sounds and those of the other works intermingling in unpredictable ways. From the outset, the artist thus poses us with a quandary of navigation. There is no map, no right or wrong way to see and hear the exhibition, but we become aware that any chosen path is simply one of several options, each of which offers a unique experience, so we must use our own intuition to select one.

Pink Noise offers an example of Yolande's artistic wizardry and demonstrates her principles of techno-intuition and sonic consciousness. At first, we only see the very large and altogether-too-pretty floor projection of the Mediterranean sun sparkling pink on turquoise sea. The imagery and scale are sublime and slightly overwhelming. Headphones hang from high above, casting a shadow on the projection, like bait dangling from a rod, luring us to metaphorically fish for sound. A hydrophone (underwater microphone) recording provides access to a sonic landscape otherwise inaccessible to human ears, offering intuitions about the underwater environment that invoke empathy for its inhabitants. What we hear contrasts starkly and startlingly with the idyllic video: heavy, industrial sounds of pleasure yachts teem beneath the saccharine surface; oversized motors crank, anchors drop, depth sounders ring in an otherworldly song. This noise pollution - at once horrible and beautiful - impinges on sea creatures, even in the national marine preserve in Spain, where the sound and video were recorded. As our intuitions are technologically mediated and amplified by the hydrophone, our consciousness of the environment - and the distressing human impact on it - is expanded through our awareness of underwater sound.

While approaching Pink Noise, we were also captivated by the enormous wall-projection, Eagle. This spectacular video installation

was commissioned especially for the exhibition and is now part of the Woodbury Art Museum's permanent collection. Although at first glance the work might appear simple, it harbors unexpected complexity. The video alternates between a close-up shot of a single bald eagle, larger than human scale, framed in a hazy circle, unselfconsciously being an eagle, and a full-frame image of two bald eagles, equally absorbed in their "eagleness," perched on barren limbs, gazing out into the distance. The artist has given us an eagle's eye view of an eagle's eye view. The potency of the eagle - as the predator at the top of the food chain, as a metaphor for superior vision, as a symbol of freedom and liberty, and as a mythic being and spirit-guide - resonates powerfully, reinforced by the sense of timelessness imparted by the video and the phenomenal halo surrounding the close-up image.

Yolande's relationship to the eagle is not simply one of artist and subject. Through her artistic meditations from her studio on the Puget Sound, itself a sort of eyrie perched above that of the eagles, she has become absorbed in eagleness. Through her artistic process, she has experienced a sort of journey mediated by these iconic beings, in which they have transported her into the distance. On a wall beside the projection, a poetic wall-drawing, hand-written by the artist, asks us, "Can you look through my layered lenses, open your ears and hear the air moving? Can you listen to the distance with me?" Here, techno-intuition is complemented by ancient technologies of meditation and spiritual practice. Eagle invites us to become absorbed in eagleness, to listen to the distance and be carried off, carried away, over the Sound, to cross the mythical water to other lands, other states of consciousness and being.

But the mythic eagle as spirit-guide contrasts with the matter-of-factness of the video. The eagles are simply and unselfconsciously being themselves. The halo is simply an optical artifact of the artist's use of low-tech compound lenses: a digital camera and telephoto lens amplified and chromatically warped by the single barrel of consumer-grade 100x binoculars. While viewing the video, we become aware of faint, indeterminate electronic sounds, which evoke parallels with the eagles'





process of scanning the distance. The sound is a hydrophone recording made on a “sea-glider,” a submarine drone that surveys extreme underwater environments, collecting oceanographic data over long durations. Most of the sounds we hear are the internal workings of the sea-glider itself: the heartbeat of its own operations. Suddenly, the eagles seem slightly mechanical and the sea-glider acquires a humanlike pathos – a solitary, lonely robot, combing the distant sea for signs of life.

Proceeding through the Eagle installation, we are immediately drawn to the large, brightly colored, spot-lit images in the following gallery. Despite the sizable dimensions of the gallery itself, the five Eyríe series prints completely energize the space with their concentrated chromatic resonance. At first the images appear to be dream-like abstractions of pure color. But as we look more carefully, we begin to recognize outsized, gently pixelated features of an eagle: feathers, beak, eye, tail. These details belie their source: the images are extreme enlargements derived from a single frame of the Eagle video in the previous gallery.

The Eyríe images offer an occasion to discuss the consistent but unusual lighting scheme that Yolande devised to reinforce the exhibition’s conceptual coherence across a diverse range of media. Prints and drawings hunger for light, while projections crave darkness, so this posed a considerable challenge. Most exhibitions use a combination of floodlights and spotlights: the former diffuse light and provide even illumination and a brighter overall ambiance; the latter focus illumination more precisely on a specific area, minimizing ambient light. Listening to the Distance uses only spotlights. By regulating their distance, number, and angle, the exquisite subtlety in the Eyríe prints’ highly saturated colors is revealed, while the video projections shine brilliantly in the dusky ambiance. This lighting scheme results in a tranquil atmosphere, punctuated by the videos and spot-lit works, which seem to jump off the wall with a dynamic, theatrical quality.

Visually whispering to us from the adjacent gallery, we see the highly atmospheric video installation *Light Entering My Room*, which captures the artist’s fascination with the magical dance of light and

shadow as it penetrates and is transformed by interior spaces. The work begins with source material drawn from video recordings made of light and shadows filtering into the artist's mobile studio through old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest. Two digital projectors, perched atop opposite corners of the gallery walls, project the video at unexpected angles on all four walls and the floor, filling the space with gently dancing tendrils of light. The scale and brightness of the projections varies with the distance and angle from the lens, skewing the images, though not beyond recognition, and creating an abstract total environment. Although the piece itself has no specific sound of its own, it absorbs the diverse ambient sounds that circulate through the museum. Those sounds, moreover, seem to animate the rhythm of the video's wave-like pulsations. Waves are, of course, the foundation of sound, which is so central to Yolande's work, and in this sense the installation seems to implicitly embody a sonic element, reinforcing the theme of listening to the distance. As art critic Geoff Wichert wrote in his excellent review of the exhibition, "Such ambient, accidental light forms an analog to ambient sound. Conventionally ignored in favor of illuminated stimulation, such lights have the power to calm the agitated modern psyche" (15 Bytes, Aug 2015, p 5). Indeed, Yolande has created a calm, contemplative atmosphere, one that gently envelops us in a virtual blanket of shadows, a dream-like environment in which near and far are continuous.

The monochromatic wave-patterns of *Light Entering My Room* find a parallel in *El Camino*, a large black and white print visible in the adjacent gallery, a space that Yolande has referred to as "the map room." The realization of an idea she has had for some time, this densely packed gallery is dedicated to maps and navigation, including works from her projects *Sun Run Sun* (2008-9), *Navigating by Circles/Sextant* (2007-8), and *Taking Soundings* (2006-8). *El Camino*, like the *Taking Soundings* series of works of which it is a part, plays with the "the edge between a score and a map, line and sound, an event and a recording," to use the artist's words. It consists of lines generated from GPS traces of a journey Yolande and I took together along *El Camino Real* in California,

the historic trail of eighteenth century Spanish missionaries, including Junipero Serra, a Franciscan friar from Mallorca, one of Spain's Balearic islands, the site of several works in the exhibition, including Pink Noise and Navigating by Circles/Sextant.

Yolande's sound and video installation Navigating by Circles/Sextant juxtaposes romantic sublimity with the challenge and pathos of navigation. The video presents the artist's first-person perspective while navigating by sextant in a sailing boat off the coast of Mallorca. In other words, we see essentially what she, herself, saw while using this eighteenth century, celestial-navigation device. Set against a black background, the blurry circular outline of the sextant's eyepiece bobs slightly on the screen. It bears a striking formal similarity to the circular image of the lone bald eagle in Eagle. In the left side of the circle, we see the bow of the boat pitch on the waves as the artist struggles to keep the sun – a small orange dot – superimposed on the horizon in the right side. The stereo sound was generated as a sonification of GPS traces from the same sea journey. Mirroring the solitary quality of the video, and rocking from side to side like the boat, the sound suggests electronic surf, rhythmic clicks and pops, and frogging tones that at once indicate location and serve as a sonic corollary to the rotation of a lighthouse lantern.

On an adjacent wall in the map-room hangs an image from Sun Run Sun, a complex project that centers on an electronic, hand-held instrument, the Satellite Sounder, invented by the artist. By joining a GPS receiver, custom software, and a composition for sonification, Yolande transforms live satellite data into music that users listen to on headphones while walking, usually in an urban environment. In Listening to the Distance, the work is represented by a single color print from a live performance of Sun Run Sun combined with a musical composition also drawn from the project. The music blends sonified GPS data from the Satellite Sounders and the comments made by users about their experience of that work. We can listen to this sound work on a sculptural object adjacent to the image. Set on a pedestal, a small digital music player and headphone amplifier are visible under Plexiglas, with two sets of head-

phones on top. The black wiring is completely exposed, a visual corollary to the GPS tracks in *El Camino* and other works from *Taking Soundings* in the map room. Indeed, the room is tied together by a similar set-up across from *Sun Run Sun* and adjacent to the three prints from *Taking Soundings*, offering a rich sonic program spanning nearly a decade of the Yolande's work as a composer.

With *El Camino* at our back, looking through the map room and past *Pink Noise* in the adjacent gallery, we see *Mississippi Tornado*, a ten-foot tall, undulating wall-drawing beside the museum's entrance. These two stark, black and white images serve as bookends to the exhibition. *Mississippi Tornado* includes a set of headphones suspended from high above. The spot-lit, black oil pastel drawing, crafted by the artist on site, reveals the changing shape of the Mississippi River over time. The so-called "Big River" famously splits the United States into east and west. The river served as a natural boundary between states, fixing political boundaries at a certain moment in time. However, as the river's shape has changed, tiny portions of Arkansas, which used to be completely west of the river, have become stranded east of the river and are now contiguous with the state of Mississippi. Similarly, portions of Mississippi have become stranded to the west of the river and are now contiguous with Arkansas. The sound on the headphones can only be described as otherworldly. I'll never forget the stormy night in Memphis when Yolande and I happened upon and listened to these entrancing musical sounds. Like the mythic Sirens that lured ancient sailors to their doom, we were mesmerized by these ethereal tones, which seemed to be coming from multiple directions. Wondering if there were some super-cool hipsters in our neighborhood experimenting with spatialized electronic music, we went outside to investigate. We could not have been more wrong or foolish: the sounds were WWII warning sirens used to signal an approaching tornado!

Listening to the Distance, like art or, for that matter, any method of making sense of the world, is obviously not foolproof. Techno-intuition may mislead us; heightened sonic consciousness may turn out to

be a false consciousness. But the same can be said of reason and logic, the foundations of philosophy and science. Nearly half a century ago, art theorist Jack Burnham argued for the crucial importance of art as a means of survival in an overly rationalized society. He feared that the cultural obsession with, and faith in, science and technology would lead to the demise of human civilization. He claimed that, "the outermost limits of reasoning" are not reachable by post-human technology but "fall eternally within the boundaries of life" (1968: 376). In this context, Yolande's work participates in the process of demythifying hyper-rational scientific culture. By suggesting alternative ways of knowing and being that are not fraught with anthropocentric prejudice, she proposes alternative systems of value in which humans, machines, animals, and the environment itself collaborate as partners in bringing forth expanded forms of consciousness and understanding. In this sense, Yolande's artworks "shamanize us into realizing our true condition" (Burnham 1974: 143). Following the logic of ancient cultural traditions, the artist's theories of techno-intuition and sonic consciousness "invert the evils of [her] tribe, and in doing so draw people away from substitute objects and back toward the ancient memories of life and productivity" (Burnham 1974: 144).

Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, New York: Braziller (1968)

Jack Burnham, "Artist as Shaman", *Arts*, 47: 9 (1973) 42-44.