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Listen to the sounds that invade us – by Caroline Boë

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Abstract: *Anthropophony.org* collaborative sound library archives low intensity noise pollution sounds to denounce them. These tiny sounds, filtered by our auditory habituation (Mossberg), are infra-thin (Duchamp) and our interest in them is endotic (Augoyard). Thanks to a system of comments from the users of the sound library, the archived physical sound is enhanced with a perceptual-communicative dimension (Barbanti). The comments show that, despite a desire to denounce, we aestheticize our perceptions.

Biography: Caroline Boë is a sound artist and a composer. Since 2013, she has devoted herself to sound art research-creation. She is currently a PHD artist-researcher in the PRISM laboratory, under the scientific direction of Christine Esclapez and the artistic direction of Peter Sinclair. This French laboratory is affiliated with Aix-Marseille University, the CNRS and the Ministry of Culture. Caroline Boë's research area concerns noise pollution, relationship art and web art. Her ecological commitment directs her work towards environmental art, sound ecology, soundscape. She was awarded a SACEM prize for the promotion of symphonic music in 2016.

Keywords: sound library; soundmap; web-art; eco-art; infra-thin; endotic; environmental ethics;

Paper: *Anthropophony.org*¹ sound library is developed as part of a thesis in “Practice and Theory of Artistic Creation” directed by Christine Esclapez and Peter Sinclair. It is Act I of an activist creation that seeks to denounce low-intensity and constant-frequency noise pollution produced by machines that operate autonomously. Low sound intensity and constant frequencies are the ideal conditions for our hearing system to filter this sound invasion. Our perception is therefore quite distant from real acoustics. Knowing that these almost inaudible sounds reveal a more general pollution, they are likely to be denounced. In this case, can the denunciation influence individual or political decisions? Is it effective in reducing low-intensity noise pollution? Various ethical reflections are mobilized by such an artistic commitment, those relating to responsibility towards the environment and sound exploration. For me, it is about proposing ways to implement these ethical commitments with an artistic contribution, and to see how this can exert an influence on practices and uses. In this activist project, I designed a creation in three acts:

¹ « Anthropophony.org, Ces sons qui nous envahissent. », <https://anthropophony.org/sons.php?ts=P> Caroline Boë, « Anthropophony.org, Ces sons qui nous envahissent. », 2019, <https://anthropophony.org/sons.php?ts=P>.

- Act I: *Anthropophony.org* collaborative sound library, related to web art. This first act is developed below, due to the general theoretical framework it offers.
- Act II: Sound walks accompanied by sound documentaries relating to social art.
- Act III: A spatialized and interactive sound installation of a dystopian landscape relating to Relational art.

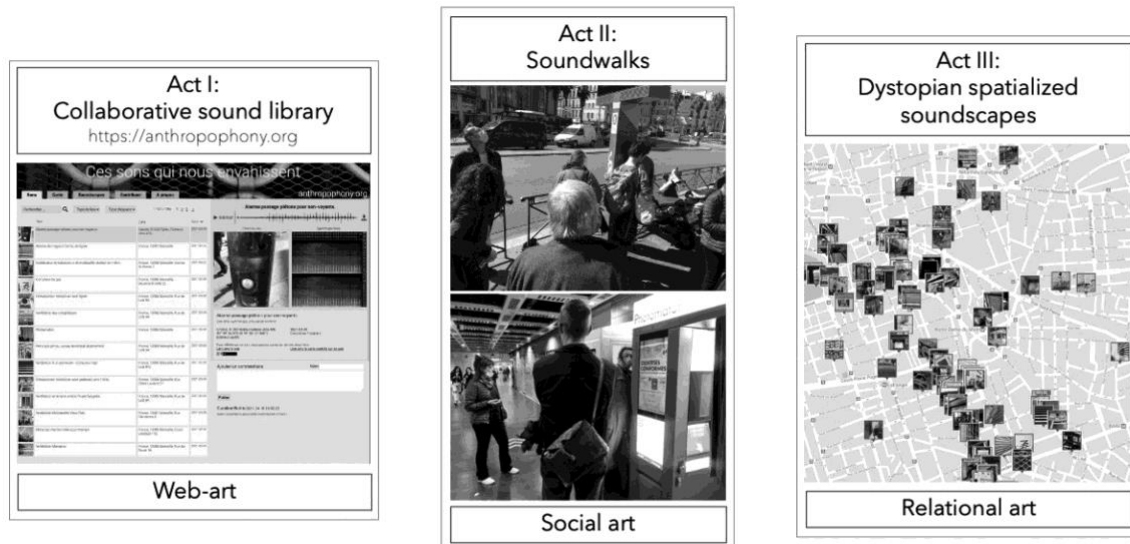


Illustration 1: *These sounds that invade us: A structured creation in three acts. Screenshots of the anthropophony.org web site, photographs of Elena Biserna and Jean-Eudes Trouslard.*

I originally designed this sound library for personal use, to better understand the complexity of the soundscape in which I am participating, and to easily find the sounds I would need to build a spatialized soundscape. When I published the sound library, several people expressed the wish to post their own recordings. I then added a *contribute* tab and the personal tool turned into a collaborative archiving place for certain sounds of our time. Finally, a kind of small collaborative museum of low intensity noise pollution appeared. From this point of view, to propose a relational framework of exchange with an acoustic community which shares a common feeling of invasion of the sound space by machines seemed to me to be a possible artistic commitment to fill the social and environmental gaps of our policies, which is discussed in the relational aesthetic defined by Nicolas Bourriaud².

While noise control is limited to quantitative aspects, the participants of this sound library collectively denounce the “invisible presence³” of these sounds. For this reason, awareness of low intensity noise is seen as a real engagement in the world. In fact, this shared sound library, affirms a certain eco-artist ambition, that of warning, as “one of the first reflexes” of the eco-artist who endeavors to “operate according to reality as it is given in progress⁴”.

² Nicolas BOURRIAUD, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon, les Presses du réel, coll.« Documents sur l’art », 1998.

³ Vladimir JANKÉLÉVITCH, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll.« Points », n° 134, 1981.

⁴ Personal translation of: « opérer en fonction de la réalité telle qu’elle se donne en cours » Paul ARDENNE, *Courants verts : Créer pour l’environnement*, 1er édition., Lormont (F), Editions Le Bord de l’eau, 2020.

These almost inaudible, almost transparent sounds reveal something *inframince*⁵, and are part of a “phenomenology of the imperceptible⁶”. Thierry Davila, who theorized Duchamp's concept, defines *inframince* as “a part of non-consciousness which passes through perceptions so tiny that they do not manifest themselves directly to attention, to consciousness⁷”. Indeed, what escapes consciousness is at the heart of civic relations, as something that gives itself to be perceived without attracting attention. These sounds of tiny intensity dodged by neglect of our discernment participate in a relative anesthesia, and in this sense, awakening the perception awakens the feeling of belonging to a community sharing the same sound space. In fact, an effort is necessary if we wish to resist what Walter Benjamin has designated as the fall of the “course of experience⁸”, to the growing poverty of our private and collective experiences. Davila, inspired by Benjamin to analyze the work of Max Neuhaus, points out that we are “at the time of the reduction of the possibility of experience⁹” because “Western man seems more than ever prey to technical rules which mechanize perception, which instrumentalize it in favor of a purely quantitative sensory logic¹⁰”.

To oppose this quantitative logic, Felix Guattari developed the notion of *mechanosphere*: a layer of overlapping human inventions – of technological, economic, theoretical, aesthetic, and social orders – which currently oppose the health of the biosphere as well as the personal development of human beings, their mental and social health. Guattari questions this *mechanosphere* to conceive a better quality of living on earth, where ethical-political choices, qualitative rather than quantitative, at the service of the multiplicities of singular desires would be priorities¹¹.

The notion of quality is also found in the qualitative sociology developed by Jean-François Augoyard who is interested in the quality of the space lived in everyday life, because everyday life is a fabric of ways of being. From an anthropological point of view, to be interested in it means to focus on the *endotic*¹² – that is, the opposite of the exotic. In the same vein, Georges Perec contrasts the *infraordinary* with the extraordinary: “to question what seems so obvious that we have forgotten its origin... To question what seems to have ceased to amaze us

⁵ *Inframince*: infra-thin Marcel DUCHAMP, Paul MATISSE et Pontus HULTÉN, *Notes*, Paris, Flammarion, coll.« Champs », n° 637, 1999.

⁶ Antje KRAMER-MALLORDY, « Disséquer l'imperceptible », *Critique d'art. Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain*, 37, 1 avril 2011, <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1258>.

⁷ Personal translation of: « une part de non-conscience qui passe par des perceptions si infimes qu'elles ne se manifestent justement pas directement à l'attention, à la conscience » Thierry DAVILA, *De l'inframince: brève histoire de l'imperceptible, de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours*, Paris, Éditions du Regard, 2010, p. 39.

⁸ Walter BENJAMIN, Rainer ROCHLITZ, Maurice de GANDILLAC et Pierre RUSCH, *Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, coll.« Folio », n° 372, 2000, p. 365.

⁹ Personal translation of: « à l'époque de l'amenuisement de la possibilité d'expérience » *Ibid.*.

¹⁰ Personal translation of: « l'homme occidental semble plus que jamais en proie aux règles techniques qui mécanisent la perception, qui l'instrumentalisent au profit d'une logique sensorielle purement quantitative » T. DAVILA, *De l'inframince...*, *op. cit.*, p. 205..

¹¹ Félix GUATTARI, « Pratiques écosophiques et restauration de la Cité subjective », *Chimères*, 50-1, 2003, p. 76-94.

¹² Jean-François AUGOYARD, *Pas à pas*, Paris, Seuil, 1979.

forever...¹³”. This refers to the philosophy of everyday life, the concept of which, linked to skepticism, comes from Pyrrho (around 300 BC): it is a question of observing the phenomena that we live by disregarding our opinions¹⁴. Indeed, it is necessary for a moment to forget our repulsion to noise pollution, if we want to experience it, especially about constant low intensity sounds – ventilation, electric buzzes etc. – that our ears filter due to our *hearing habituation*¹⁵.

What would then be the condition of possibility of the voluntary act of listening to low intensity sounds? It is based on the ability to be immersed without resistance in the thick urban sound. Being both active in discernment and available to welcome the infinite sound sharpens our hearing acuity and thus shifts our threshold of perception. This attitude – or rather this non-attitude – joins the phenomenological thought of Merleau-Ponty, for whom reflection “sinks into the world instead of dominating it¹⁶”. It is, for the listener, to be “a stakeholder in what he observes and in the forest of phenomena that he raises in order to decipher their resonances and relationships¹⁷”. This decoding of nuances is made possible by the suspension of our dichotomous judgment of *wanted sounds / unwanted sounds*¹⁸ to better understand the complexity of the sound richness of the landscape in which we participate.

Learning to listen actively and not passively strengthens our connection to the world, not only to the biosphere as Bernie Krause recommends¹⁹, but also to the *mechanosphere*. Thus, for Carmen Pardo, the sound artist has the responsibility of taking care of the quality of his listening:

The experience of listening reveals our relationship to the environment, our relationship to others. [...] In a sound, we can perceive many sounds, and for the sound artist the way of saying the sounds is related to the way he listens to them²⁰.

¹³ Personal translation of: « interroger ce qui semble tellement aller de soi que nous en avons oublié l’origine... Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner... » Georges PEREC, *L’infra-ordinaire*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll.« La Librairie du XXle siècle », 1989, p. 11.

¹⁴ SEXTUS EMPIRICUS et Pierre PELLEGRIN, *Esquisses pyrrhoniennes*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll.« Points », n° 352, 1997.

¹⁵ Makis SOLOMOS, Roberto BARBANTI, Guillaume LOIZILLON, Carmen PARDO SALGADO, Kostas PAPARRIGOPOULOS, Mihai ILIESCU, Agostino DI SCIPIO et Franz MOSSBERG, *Musique et écologies du son. Propositions théoriques pour une écoute du monde*, Paris, L’Harmattan, coll.« Musique Philosophie », 2016.

¹⁶ Personal translation of: « s’enfoncé dans le monde au lieu de la dominer » Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY et Claude LEFORT, *Le visible et l’invisible suivi de Notes de travail*, Paris, Gallimard, n° 36, 1979, p. 60.

¹⁷ Personal translation of: « partie prenante de ce qu’il observe et de la forêt de phénomènes qu’il fait lever pour en décrypter les résonances et les relations ». T. DAVILA, *De l’inframince...*, op. cit., p. 213.

¹⁸ R. Murray SCHAFER, *Our Sonic Environment, THE SOUNDSCAPE, The Tuning of the World*, Rochester, Destiny Books, 1994.

¹⁹ Bernie KRAUSE, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World’s Wild Places*, New York, Back Bay Books, 2013.

²⁰ Personal translation of: « L’expérience de l’écoute dévoile notre rapport au milieu, notre rapport aux autres. [...] Dans un son, on peut percevoir de nombreux sons, et pour l’artiste sonore la manière de dire les sons est en rapport avec sa manière de les écouter. » Carmen PARDO SALGADO, « Entendre le monde sonner ».

And this “way of listening to them” is an exploratory and creative path towards engagement with the world, as Salomé Voegelin emphasizes:

[Listening is considered] not as a physiological fact but as an act of engaging with the world. It is in the engagement with the world rather than in its perception that the world and myself within it are constituted, and it is the sensorial mode of that engagement that determines my constitution and that of the world. [...] In this sense listening is not a receptive mode but a method of exploration, a mode of "walking" through the soundscape/the sound work. What I hear is discovered not received, and this discovery is generative, a fantasy: always different and subjective and continually, presently now.²¹

Exploratory listening is therefore not only “an additional parameter or indicator that we add to others to analyze the world, but a new way of being and hearing it²²”. These details from Roberto Barbanti, Carmen Pardo and Salomé Voegelin suggest that listening allows us to know the world and to orient ourselves in it: it is, according to Barbanti's formula, a “privileged criterion and tool of gnoseological investigation²³”. This is precisely what is aimed at by the ecology of sound that Murray Schafer has defined as a theoretical and artistic current:

Ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and their environment. Acoustic ecology is therefore the study of sounds in relationship to life and society. This cannot be accomplished by remaining in the laboratory. It can only be accomplished by considering on location the effects of the acoustic environment on the creatures living in it²⁴.

Anthropophony.org platform exhibits zoomed, normalized sound fragments, as if using a “magnifying glass to touch²⁵”, according to the expression of Marcel Duchamp. Visitors to the web site navigate a virtual museum that offers a subjective inventory of the sound environment, where nuances of everyday life take priority, where the way of listening to the world reveals and sharpens our way of being in the world, where acoustic ecology changes the paradigm of perception of the world, where sound exploration is fertile for the imagination. To relay the information, I use the social network Facebook with a page²⁶ and a group²⁷, which collect comments. Here are a few anonymized examples:

- “We learn to listen, to bring sounds to life on their own”
- “Crazy all these sounds”

²¹ Salomé VOEGELIN, *Listening to noise and silence: towards a philosophy of sound art*, New York, Continuum, 2010, p. 3-4.

²² Personal translation of: « un paramètre ou un indicateur de plus que l'on ajoute aux autres pour analyser le monde, mais une nouvelle façon d'y être et de l'entendre » Roberto BARBANTI et Pierre MARIETAN, *Sonorités, N° 6 (Écologie sonore Technologies Musiques)*, Nîmes, Champ Social Éditions, 2011, p. 12..

²³ Personal translation of: « critère et outil d'investigation gnoséologique privilégié » *Ibid.*

²⁴ R.M. SCHAFER, *Our Sonic Environment, THE SOUNDSCAPE, The Tuning of the World...*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

²⁵ Personal translation of: « une loupe pour toucher » M. DUCHAMP, P. MATISSE et P. HULTÉN, *Notes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22..

²⁶ « Ces sons qui nous envahissent » https://www.facebook.com/pg/Boe.Caroline/posts/?ref=page_internal Caroline Boë, « Ces sons qui nous envahissent - Publications », 2020, https://www.facebook.com/pg/Boe.Caroline/posts/?ref=page_internal.

²⁷ « Anthropophony » <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2404853139815759> Caroline Boë, « Anthropophony | Facebook », 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2404853139815759>.

- “I'm listening!”
- “Thank you for all these sonorous bits of abnormally constant real”
- “This is absolutely disturbing!”
- “That sound smashed my ears and my head”
- “Great find”
- “Out of context I find them rather beautiful and full of interest, very far from the idea of pollution”

These few comments show on the one hand how subjective listening is, and on the other hand that some listeners take pleasure in exercising their listening skills. The notion of pleasure also reveals our ambiguity: denouncing the invasion of sound space by *technophonie*²⁸ provokes a certain resilience and we constantly aestheticize our perceptions. However, thanks to the exchange of feelings, activist issues arise, in connection with social ecology: sharing stories, intensifying the feeling of being part of a common story, producing collective memory. Social networks develop interactions which add a perceptual-receptive and perceptual-communicative dimension to the archived physical sound²⁹. The archive becomes a constellation where emotions and singular stories revolve, it takes the form of a snowball that rolls down the slope, carrying all the comments along the way. This is almost molecular art, related to with genetic manipulations on DNA, and showing that what is invisible to the naked eye is also a medium for messages. These archives are, in a way, Petri dishes in which sounds are symbolically cultivated and “raise the question of the responsibility and ethics of a society plagued by the techniques it invents³⁰”.

Raising the issue of responsibility and environmental ethics engulfs us in a critique of the very notion of ethics. Indeed, as Hicham-Stéphane Afeissa demonstrates, we are faced with two ethical currents ontologically quite distant: the Anglo-Saxon current of the *intrinsic value of nature* which considers “non-human living beings, as well as the abiotic components of the natural environment [...] as objects of moral concern for themselves³¹”, and the continental European current which “emphasizes the idea of our responsibility in the use of techniques and the need to find a solution that would involve a reorganization of politics³²”. To summarize quickly, Anglo-American environmental ethics, by limiting itself to moral obligations concerning the non-human environment, criticizes European *principle of responsibility anthropocentrism*³³ which seeks ways to integrate nature into the “social, economic and

²⁸ Quentin ARNOUX, *Écouter l'Anthropocène. Pour une écologie et une éthique des paysages sonores*, Nouvelle Aquitaine, Le bord de l'eau, 2021.

²⁹ R. BARBANTI et P. MARIETAN, *Sonorités, N° 6 (Écologie sonore Technologies Musiques)...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

³⁰ Personal translation of: « soulèvent la question de la responsabilité et de l'éthique d'une société en proie aux techniques qu'elle invente » Catherine VOISON, « L'art in vivo ou la mythification de la molécule d'ADN », *Images Re-vues. Histoire, anthropologie et théorie de l'art*, 8, 20 avril 2011, <http://journals.openedition.org/imagesrevues/503>.

³¹ Personal translation of: « les êtres vivants non humains, ainsi que les composantes abiotiques du milieu naturel [...] comme des objets de préoccupation morale pour eux-mêmes » Hicham-Stéphane AFEISSA, « De l'éthique environnementale au principe responsabilité et retour », *Éducation relative à l'environnement. Regards - Recherches - Réflexions*, Volume 8, 20 décembre 2009, <http://journals.openedition.org/ere/2084>.

³² Personal translation of: « met l'accent sur l'idée de notre responsabilité dans l'usage des techniques et sur la nécessité de trouver une solution qui passerait par une recomposition du politique » *Ibid.*, p. 10..

³³ Hans JONAS, *Le principe responsabilité*, Anjou(Québec), les Éd. CEC, coll.« Philosophies vivantes », 2007.

political dynamics³⁴”. While the first, limited to moral duties, seems ineffective on a planetary scale, the other, more active from a legislative point of view, tends towards anthropocentrism and therefore poses a problem of environmental design. There are therefore no clear answers, neither about the suspicions of anthropocentrism, nor about the risks of ineffectiveness, and this observation commits us to accept to “stay with the trouble” as advised by Donna Haraway. Staying with the trouble in a world where humans, decomposed into humus, compost with other species³⁵. It would therefore be a question of allowing ethics to be composted, according to Haraway's metaphor.

However, is it not ethics, this ancient and Western human construction, our only artistic safeguard? Our Western civilization is indeed questioned here, and the simple fact of being interested in it is an anthropocentrism that we would like to decenter without succeeding. Environmental ethics therefore undermines the very notion of ethics and perhaps even blows it up. Neither eco-art nor ecological activism seem to be able to break this dead end today. Perhaps we can just compose in a sort of decaying ethical humus as Haraway advocates and try to wake up through artistic action guided by critical ethical questioning.

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³⁵ Donna J. HARAWAY, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016.

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