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Sonic peripheries : middling with/in the event

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Summary

The research explores *what* and *how* sound *does* in certain art practices; it lends an ear to so-called ‘material-discursive’ events that come into expression as in/determined sonic occurrences through aesthetic practices. Likewise, the research done in and through the arts attunes to the vibrational immanence that underlies all experience. This view considers the sonic as a vibrational force and an affective, affirmative, albeit paradoxical event: oscillating between matter and matter mattering, intuited as intensive force and apprehended as ‘aesthetic figure’ through sensation. This ambiguity or sense of betweenness is felt throughout the thesis and lies at the heart of the inquiry.

The research traces this sense of the between through curated exhibition-events featuring three distinct sonic art practices and one additional offshoot case. The experimental-performative nature of the artistic events under discussion create experiences that are made up of matter and (material-discursive) meaning that give rise to *sonic occurrences* that are specific to their taking-shape in a given circumstance. This taking-shape occurs in and through sonic practices qua human and nonhuman agency; hence, the research investigates notions of nature-culture and nonhuman-human relations through the affects/effects of sound’s happening.

The questions this research asks follow from the above. How does a sonic artwork-performance bring about sensations that leave experiential traces that we neither know nor recognize as we encounter the vibrational flux – the virtual or *void* – from which im/material expression arises? How do the material condition of a sonic artwork-performance (the content) and the ensuing sensation (the form of expression) co-emerge, are produced, in one another? What is the

role of the curator and the artist? What is the part of the audience? While doing the research, other questions followed that address the specifics of each case study and framed the conditions and procedures for gathering empirical and conceptual materials. However, the basic concern that informs every part of the research process is *in wonder of* what happens when sound happens as an aesthetic force. The emphasis of each query lies on the active occasion, the radical empiricism, the moment of encounter, *how* the sonic event comes to pass as aesthetic force creating specific semblances, resonances, or types of ‘spaciousness *in-act.*’

The thesis has three main objectives. Firstly, it describes sonic art practice as experimental research and makes a case for curating such practices as a form of research; it positions this type of research as a contribution to new forms of knowledge and provides a resource for future research-creations and (reform of) evaluation practices. Secondly, it brings together philosophy and art practice to elaborate a genuine manner of working with sonic matter (mattering); it conceptualizes and materializes novel ways of thinking, and creates a case for writing itself as practice; that is, it seeks to practice what it theorizes. Thirdly, it advocates a certain transformation of self that lets us side-step ourselves, intervene and invent possible worlds or future fabulations as the offshoot case has shown through the guise of the ‘carto-mytho-grapher’. Practicing a process-oriented exploration complexifies as it advances; it creates resonances between theory and practice, between the audience and sonic artworks, between the written thesis – inclusive of presented artifacts – and the reader. It thus wants *not* to reduce but foster awareness of the ongoing complexity of life.

The research employs a transdisciplinary methodology to accommodate the above with the aim of creating research strategies that allow for the encounter with unknown unknowns (what we don’t know we don’t know) and new means for the unlocking of what possibly can be known from the indecipherable (make unknowns ‘palpable’ through invention – invention meant on the part of the

participant alongside the sonic artwork-performance). It forges a research practice that shows affinity with artistic research and speculative philosophy, thus positioning the thesis in both spectrums. It draws from various philosophical resources, chiefly Deleuze and Whitehead, and engages with wider debates on sonic materialism, speculative pragmatism, and non-representational methodologies. It weaves together what derives from the research exploration: artifacts, strange sensations, diverse meanings, and interpretations to engender the thesis' own *poetics* and native concepts.

There is a kinship between this type of research and the methodologies known to the humanities and social sciences, i.e., (post)phenomenological, ethnographic, hermeneutic, and heuristic approaches. This artistic-cum-qualitative research develops bespoke methods adequate to the research aims above-introduced, such as the 'Performative Encounter activity' that tends to the *atmospheric* – i.e., the hard-to-grasp affective tones or 'moods' produced by sonic acts – and provide the research participants (audience) with the tools to probe and auscultate the sonic; it makes use of questionnaires and participant interviews. The research documentation includes photo, video, and audio materials, and various other (reproductions of) artifacts archived online, i.e., in the form of a research journal that also contains quotations, freewriting, correspondences, articulations of ideas, etc. gathered during the research for reference and uptake of future *anarchiving*. 'Anarchiving' is understood here as an attunement to what escapes the archive but nonetheless affects the event's capacity to activate potentials of variant (sonic) occurrences yet to come. The 'anarchive' is a concept coined by Erin Manning and the SenseLab collective, a so-called 'laboratory for thought in motion' which explores the active passage between research and creation.

The thesis is structured in four parts – with respective chapters that pertain to the specifics of that part – following a tripartite Introduction that lays out the incentive behind and objectives of the research. This Introduction

provides the reader with 'a roadmap towards sonic occurrence', i.e., it gives an overview of each chapter and informs about the online addendum as part of the thesis. Part One considers the concept of middling in and with the event of sound's occasioning, and explores the encounter with the sonic by drawing on case examples; its gist lies in the experience of 'the between', living the relation connecting one experience to the next, one occurrence to another. Part Two looks critically and 'po-ethically' at what research into sonic art practices might mean and what it can do. It describes the *Sonic Peripheries* (SP) artistic series – SP#5 (David Strang), SP#6 (Shawn Decker), and SP#7 (Stephen Lacy) – and discusses the SP Performative Encounter activity in the chapter under the same name. Part Three enacts what the research does through theory-practice entanglements: it wants to push the thesis to the *unlimit*, i.e., create fabulatory accounts that speak of middling with/in the event, and *reinvoke* the sense of betweenness that comes to matter; it ties a conceptual knot with Manning et al.'s 'anarchive'. Part Four presents the offshoot case, the philosophically inspired 'poesis'/discussion on 'kairos' and its (aesthetic) experiment: *How is Nature; An Event. Image. Writing. Works in progress (process)*. The chapter titled 'Refrain: Middling With/In the Event' (not a final part in a strict sense) recapitulates aspects of the research and 'cross-stitches' the conceptual threads, as to create a closing, albeit an open image of thought. The Postscript, a final note or fabulation, leaves us 'a grin without a carto-mytho-grapher' (meant as a nod towards *Alice in Wonderland* and towards 'haecceity', the *thisness* of the Event as relations of movement and rest, oscillation and speed, in short, sonic occurrence).

In alignment with the research questions (as point of entry to the inquiry) and the objectives above, the research findings are as follows. The curated art events produce original sonic performances and artworks; also, and essential to this type of research-creation, the one-off experimental feature of these events present the condition for the curator-led and audience-based exploration of experiences through aesthetic encounters. This approach allowed individuals to

explore sound's ambiguity in a playful and heuristic manner – inviting new insights into sound's happening as a material, conceptual and '(al)luring' phenomenon. This research path incited new knowledge – embodied, non-conceptual knowings that in turn provoked materialized occurrences of so-called 'fugacious expression' of the sonic. The latter neologism is a placeholder for when matter comes to matter, when the 'more-than' of vibrational force – as a *specific* thisness of the event – translates into physical shape (as individuation or actualization of the more-than). The performative power of the productive encounter with and disclosure of the unknown/'unforeheard' lures the thinking towards a critical perspective of what is and what might become.

This reflective yet unfinished thinking together with the research derivatives create a ripple effect for future thought in motion that surpasses the research archive and moves towards sound's anarchiving – deploying writing practice. The relevance of this outcome lies in the process of moving sonic thinking not to an endpoint but to keep the thinking sidling along a *feeling-understanding* continuum. Whitehead's philosophy of 'pure feeling' informs the research just as the written part of this thesis informs the reader that pure feeling and understanding are not opposing ends, thus bringing into question an affect-reason dichotomy. This stance can also be felt throughout the offshoot case. The research thus wants to advocate a nuanced relationship to knowledge – in the arts and sciences more generally.

The sonic's distinct being, or rather *becoming* as always already resounding the between, brings forth concepts which offer fresh perspectives for/on philosophical aesthetics and new materialism(s). The concepts (and provisional neologisms) that have developed from the research – 'middling with/in the event', 'fugacious expression', 'perceptual mannerism', among others – speak distinctively of the event's more-than human soundings that render theory-practice entanglements meaningful. That is, they make discrete, felt, and understood what is otherwise in flux. This research thus invented methods to encounter

the ineffable as much as it seeks to problematize methodologies that aim to objectify the ineffable (and its effects). That said, the thesis brings writing and sonic practice together such that writing itself becomes a practice (i.e., enacts a 'perceptual mannerism'). The written parts of the thesis as scientific '(ad)venture' presents an open-endedness that aspires to entice the critical reader into thinking/feeling the ambiguity of sound's occurrence; it upholds an ethico-aesthetics that is never applied without rigor. The thesis thus proposes a way: an alternative reasoning through which to consider what research-creation can mean and what it can mean to do, how theory informs practice and how practice speaks back to theory and vice versa.

The research deliberately *sounds across* art research, sound studies, and philosophy to trigger sympathetic resonances and amplify the ethos the written project engenders. *Sonic Peripheries: Middling With/in the Event* is offered as a contribution to the fields of knowledge across these disciplines.