

Reinventing Landscape ?
About the Mamori Art Lab 2007

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From november 10th to 26th, 2007, i was invited to participate in the Mamori Art Lab, coordinated by Francisco Lopez, which has taken place in the Amazonian forest, by the Mamori Lake and nearby Manaus (Brazil). A dozen sound artists from all over the world, whose practices and problematics had in common an approach of phonography, have taken part in it¹. That fortnight away from civilization was the occasion of many sound recording sessions in the jungle, on location soundworks and theoretical discussions. More than a straight report on an experience, these notes aim to be the echo of a collective thinking, opened in Mamori.

The group Francisco Lopez got together in Mamori was probably reflecting quite a variety of approaches on the questions of soundscape and musical experiments ; however, without being representative of all the attempts made under the appellations of *field-recording*, *acoustic ecology* or *phonography*. Once the figure of the walker identified, microphone in hands and recorder shoulder strapped, it is not yet certain that we are talking of the same thing, as these practices implicate very different relations with reality, with the sound environment, its transformation and representation within the musical medium.

The issue of Mamori Art Lab was not exactly technical, nor purely theoretical, nor only a moment of creation ; but it was a little of all these things and all of them occurred. Maybe the question was, in the first place, to set a thinking and a practice in perspective, by immersing completely in an environment. In sum, it was about doing what each one of the participants was used to do solitary but this time collectively, so as to re-examine together our ways of listening and our ways of doing...

In fact, this hesitation to characterise the experience only appears afterwards, when it is time to write it up. When we arrived in the Amazon, the situation was self-explanatory, it was taking place in the depths of the tropical rainforest and this reason alone was sufficient to legitimate the experience for each one of us, without needing to question any further what the work to come would imply.

Jungle = paradigm

As for me, i had no experience of the jungle at all, neither had i any preconceived idea on that topic before going there. Yet, it would not have come to my mind, nor to the minds of the people i had discussed the project with, to doubt the interest of the travel to come. For a sound-recordist, the rainforest foretells a deep listening experience. Besides the landmark pieces of the genre (such as Lopez's *La Selva*), it might be because with the work of phonography, somehow or other, always comes a travel, a shift or movement that also shifts the conditions of perception. From that exploratory point of view, the Amazonian forest is somehow the further one can go. And indeed, even before one starts listening to it, the

¹ Mamori Art Lab 2007, coordinated by Francisco Lopez, with Matt Shoemaker, Slavek Kwi (Artificial Memory Trace), David Drury, Sam Hamilton, Simon Whetham, Scott Konzelmann (Chop Shop), Andrea Williams, Ruben Garcia, Thanassis Kaproulias (Novi_Sad) and Todd Shalom.
See : <http://www.malab.net>

Amazon already grows as an idea, a paradigm that would be the exact opposite of the urban environment. Being in the jungle is primarily being as far as possible from the city ; and as it is about listening, it is also being as far as possible from our auditory habits.

Nonetheless, i believe that for each member of our group in Mamori there was no expectations about discovering in the Amazonian wild some kind of more immediate truth of perception to oppose to the conditioned one in which we are usually living. If a wide range of poetry tinged with mystic, in which the real is transcended in the experience of listening, sometimes habits acoustic ecology or phonography productions, nobody in Mamori had come for such an initiatory travel. As a matter of fact, the jungle experience, especially with a group of twelve, proved to require more organization and pragmatism than it gave free rein to the pure subjective experience.

Yet remains this vivacious and blended idea, according to which the reality in Nature, and increasingly with the distance to civilization, would be a little more 'real' than the reality of everyday life...

Jungle = experience

The truth is that nature, the actual one, is not easily to be reached. As one could guess, the only fact of our presence in the forest frightens away most of the animals we can admire full-screen in nature documentaries on Tv. Getting into this environment, as rich as it can be, requires some concessions, even more as a group. That is why for most of the sound recordings we have done in Mamori, we have left the equipment in some chosen place before buzzing off so as to let things happen without the disturbance of our presence. That way of proceeding was quite unusual for the most of us, and it has determined, in the long run, a singular relationship with the environment we were dipped in.

Is it to say that we have not really listen to the Amazon ? In any case, we have left the machines proceeding, extracting a sound matter without fullfuling the immediate and actual experience of the listening in context. Thus this sounds promptly gained a queer status, which was questioning the exact core of our prattice, that is to say the issue of acousmatic and decontextualization.

Of course, not all the recordings sessions have been following that procedure and as a group, furthermore, all the insects, animals and natural phenomenons that did not mind the human presence were already building up a very rich matter. But that specific situation has been the most frequent and it was worth shattering our habits as sound recordists ; and with them, our little pride of specialists able to determine what the 'proper' conditions of a recording should be. Most of all, it allowed to state practically what is generally at issue within any attempt to capture the sonic reality, that is : how recording in itself is already a transformation of reality into something else. Something that would be cultural, technical or aesthetical, in anyway something that would dismissed out of hand the possibility of a documentary objectivity or the faithful testimonial of a subjective experience.

Sound recording in the absence of sound recordist comprises this blind spot, as in the lense of a camera, in which everything can be seen but the precise moment when the shutter hides to sight what will actually be recorded on the film. In our Amazonian experience, the 'Nature' was drifting away, as we were trying to capture it, into the abstraction of a very cultural conception. What would eventually end on tape was not even a souvenir, no more than a testimonial or a document but really a *matter*, already disconnected from its original reality

and not yet part of a cultural conception. A matter that would have the neutrality of an acoustic phenomenon, of a *sound object*.

Jungle in reduced listening

The conditions of our jungle experience have taken us away from a relation to the *soundscape*, in the way of Murray Schafer, substituting the approach of a sound phenomenology.

The great blank in the theory of Murray Schafer² is to fail to examine the way moral judgment organizes in advance an order of values within the so-called truth of the sonic world. In reality, Schafer's 'truth' of the world lies with the determinisms of his ideology, yet he would like to see that truth supported by the strictness and objectivity of the scientific method. Schafer's *soundscape* is corresponding to the caricature with the prejudice that Anne Cauquelin³ demonstrates in our relationship with the landscape : that is, the way we are building up, through the notion of landscape, what is actually an intellectual fabrication of the reality of Nature, which in fact remains outside of us and unattainable.

Maybe it is not that much of a paradox if the experience of jungle, a nature one would have believed to be so natural, is eventually leading us to such a reconsideration of the relationship with reality : because in that case, it is the excess of 'naturalness' itself that overcomes our ability to invent the landscape within the perception. The jungle is a territory that is impossible to map and impossible to frame, its continuity is not to be folded into the landscape conception. Even if recording technology reduces the range of what is possible and determines a reality limited by its physical representation, it does not allow us, on the other hand, to master the interaction that we, sound recordists, listening walkers, are committing with the environment. Then, we are not facing a *landscape* anymore, but standing in the middle of an *environment*, that is overflowing us.

Undoing the un-thought of the landscape within the work of listening is at first to accept to lose control. That is, to deconstruct the authority that the educated hears exert on perception, so as to (re)construct, in the context itself, the possibility of a *reduced listening*⁴ and the possibility of a relation with sound as a pure phenomenon.

Back and forth

Within this relation to reality, the environment, even in its Amazonian density, is not communicating anything. As far as we can tell, only the technology is impressing its mark, which is the only thing relating to an order of discourse. But for the technological formatting, the sound phenomenon recorded on tape is not saying anything beyond its physical neutrality, and it is because of this neutrality itself that the multiplicity of the musical becomings opens.

In Mamori, the conditions of 'studio work' were not as comfortable as can be, not only for the generator breakdowns but also because the decontextualized sound was somehow overlaying itself, duplicating : the 4000 Hz cicadas, ever-present on tapes, add together with the same stridencies around the house and through the headphones... Regardless, trying to accomplish some electroacoustic work on location was a fulfilling experience, because it allowed us to

² R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape, the tuning of the World*, New York, Knopf, 1977.

³ Anne Cauquelin, *L'invention du paysage*, Paris, Plon, 1989.

⁴ Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*, Paris, Seuil, 1966.

extend the process and to recompose, within an unusual immediacy, the issues of phonography.

In the continuation of a phenomenological approach to the sound matter, production of phonography, like the phenomenon itself, is not telling any kind of truth about the reality its dealing with.

On the other hand, it affects our preconception of reality that invents the landscape within the perception of nature, which Anne Cauquelin calls an « unknown knowledge ». By opening a new field of perceptive experiences into an *other* sonic reality, that of the musical listening, phonography somehow *reinvents the landscape*. And maybe it is also shattering our cultural determinisms, by substituting to the landscape as a preconception in perception the multiplicity of the *possible* landscapes in the experience of musical listening.

In the Amazon, the collective setting into perspective of our practices took place somewhere around there, in this coming and going from confrontation to a sound environment to its reconfiguration in the electroacoustic research. The musical production changing the listening itself, which in the case of phonography would be what Pierre Schaeffer called the « instrumental preliminary ». Then, if there is a listening 'know-how' to be worked out during the process, it has probably something to do with a deconditioning, with an ability to dislearn a preconceived perception of the world.

Our Amazonian immersion was also a step, Mamori sounds gaining another quality with time and distance ; because in the end, a return ticket is necessary to achieve the process of decontextualization. But i believe that for each of us, that travel is far from being completed.