

« Walking, listening, composing. »

About the electroacoustic composition project 'Walk(s)', carried out in June 2008 in residency at Binaural Media, Nodar (Portugal)

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When sound artists, artists using phonography and sound recordings, come to recount how they got into their vocation, it is not unusual to hear stories of their personal experiences, of founding moments in which originates their awareness of the sonic environment... As for me, I remember very strong, moving moments of listening, but, in the very beginning, I got to use sound recordings more by chance. Because of my inability to play any kind of instruments I ended using microphones: the transformation of sounds, the strangeness they would gain to be transposed into speakers were already fascinating to me, but not being able to produce sounds I had to capture them. So my work with sounds did not become necessary from my personal listening experience, rather it was the haphazardly practical work with sounds that, little by little, affected the way I was hearing. In the long run, it became clear that my listening had changed, that I was impregnated with it, that it was changing my routes and usages, first the use I would make of my body, then the use that, through it, I would make of the world.

This is how, I think, I came to call my practice as a sound artist back into question, and how composing with the sounds of the environment became, necessarily, composing *with* the environment, that is to say within the interaction between the body and what is around it, according to a place, according to a usage of the space. What came clear, eventually, was that listening had to be done with the entire body, the physical body as well as the social body.

When I am listening to the world *otherwise*, the world changes, and as it appears then, it is telling me something different from what I used to know. The transformation of my usages of the world, of my ways of seeing or listening is thus able to transform my knowledge of the world, it is able to *trouble* what I would have taken for the truth, for the obviousness of perception.

Such a reexamination of the perceptual truth witnesses the presence of an *enunciation* of the world before perception, a discourse about the world that would be found in perception itself. At the very moment I am hearing the 'truck passing by', I am actually giving credit to a discourse about the world: the one telling me what that truck is, and what objective role it is playing in relation with me. Usually, I do not have to identify or question the issues of the knowledge and discourse appearing there: 'I hear the truck passing by', that is the truth. But the imaginary – social and ideological – construction such an enunciation represents is set to light when I actually *listen* to that sound, actively enough to dis-learn what I know about trucks so as to perceive the sound phenomenon only, the acoustic vibration.

In a similar way, the idea of 'landscape' allows us to reexamine how our knowledge of the world modifies the way we are actually perceiving it.

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<sup>1</sup> The word is from John Cage.

In her book 'L'invention du paysage'<sup>2</sup>, Anne Cauquelin questions the feeling of obviousness we experience in front of a landscape, as it would actually mask an 'unthought' – an 'unknown knowledge', she also says – which roots are to be found in a codified representation of the world. A codification, as it occurs, that is an ideological representation of the organisation of the world, which invention dates back to the Renaissance, which is determining our relation to the landscape and through which we are still interpreting the world today.

When Murray Schafer introduces the idea of 'soundscape'<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, his conception lacks such a critical hindsight. The reflexivity between the description of the object and the position of the enunciating subject is nowhere to be found: in fact, the objectivity of the Schaferian soundscape is impregnated with the subjective values of the author. Under his notion of soundscape underlies a representation of the world, a predetermined discourse, structure of which appears at certain places in the text, as a gradation of subjective values that ideologically organizes the objective truth. Thus Schafer's inclinations, and the hierarchy of values that determines his relation to landscape(s), inherit an occidental form of the unthought described by Cauquelin; it even betrays, at some points, an aristocratic conception of the harmony of nature versus the mediocrity of the industrial landscape.

The interpretative necessity within the perception of landscape, function of a knowledge, is left aside in Schafer's work: he never problematizes the social and physical position of the listening subject.

With the help of such examples, however, it remains possible to establish that the issues of perception are arranged within a *system*, inside of which a discourse of the world (a) influences perception (b), which generates, in its turn, usages and behaviors (c) in conformity with the original discourse. Thence the reactivation of *listening* – as a mean of reflexivity – implies the ability of going back up the chain: it would be by modifying one's physical and social position (c) within a perceptual environment that it becomes possible to change the conditions of perception (b) and thus to reexamine the conceptual determinisms that organize our conception of the world (a)...

These preconceptions and discourses of the world are not univocal, however, as they are eminently cultural: as well as a dominant and normative culture impregnates each society, a dominant and normative cultural discourse colors perception. But as a cultural phenomenon, perception can also be plural, it can be appropriated, in short it can be *cultivated*. Only that implies to be able to see how our relation with *Nature* – and therefore with the 'naturalness' of perception – already constitutes a cultural construction, that is, precisely, what Anne Cauquelin intended to analyse.

Considering the issue of perception under the cultural and social angle allows to understand its *economy*.

Talking about an *economy of perception* means to state that inside a system of construction of the sensitive being, we have to deal with discursive models and forms of authority that determine our understanding of the data of perception, and with which we have to *negotiate* – that is to say: to conform our senses with dominant cultural norms, or else to confront with

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Cauquelin, *L'invention du Paysage*, Plon, 1989

<sup>3</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *Our sonic environment and the Soundscape, the tuning of the World*, Destiny Books, 1977.

them by inventing the alternatives that would allow us to re-appropriate, at least partially, the modalities of the exchange between discourse, perception and usage.

Yet, I believe that the ability to activate listening enough to change the 'economic' modalities of perception is not something we can pretend to in itself. Treating of the issue of perception only, by claiming like Schafer does a superior ability for listening that would be eager to escape cultural determination, is not enough.

Indeed, if there is something like a listening 'know-how', the important is to understand how perceptual subjectivity actually embodies in a practice and thus how the act is able to modify the knowledge. As a matter fact, it seems to me that many sound artists left the issue of usages untouched. Apparently, the claim is only qualitative – a listening of 'higher quality' – for justifying the practice: it is about having a 'good ear', eager to set the veritable beauty of the perceived object to light. The weakness of such an approach, I believe, is that it is not changing anything to the establish truth that determines perception, on the contrary, it would mean to substitute it with an even more veritable truth, a transcendent truth<sup>4</sup>. Yet, far from transcendence, these artists often rely on other practices and knowledges – technical, ornithological, ecological, sociological, architectural, etc. – which, in the first place, modify the point of view and the usage. What such borrowings allow is not a listening of higher quality, but the physical and social position of the listener to change of nature.

Then, if the activation of the listening cannot be worked for itself, on a strictly qualitative, subjective and abstract level, it is possible, on the other hand, to contradict the determining discourse on the cultural level, to affect our determinations by *the tactical transformation of our usages of the world* – Michel De Certeau states on the cultural issue of usages in these terms<sup>5</sup>. In other words, if the claim of a 'better' listening does not say anything about the instituted truth that determines our interpretation of the world through perception, it remains possible to trouble that truth by setting the conditions of an 'other' listening.

During my work in Nodar, facing the contemplative obviousness of the landscape, I have chosen to draw straight lines at random on a map. Following these lines was a tactical choice not to be led by an only feeling of the landscape's beauty that would have driven me to passive contemplation – a feeling that would be necessarily determined by cultural preconception – instead of making possible an active perception. Then it was about setting the body back into motion, in an other and undetermined way: not staying on the paths anymore, as they would have kept the landscape – as an constructed image, an imagination of the world – out of the reach of my experience.

The work of sound recording, as well as any work using an observation methodology, probably, is dreaming of the perfect observer: altogether ideally present in the heart of the event, in the right place at the right time, and ideally absent, not disturbing in any way the integrity – the truth – of the event he is witnessing.

As an alternative to such an aporia, walking straight through rivers and bushes is not a

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<sup>4</sup> The possibility of an art work transcending the triviality of reality asserts a separation between Art and Culture: as transcendent beauty is necessarily an exception of the trivial, an unusual that is not changing anything to the determinisms of the usual.

<sup>5</sup> See Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, Gallimard, 1980.

studious and attentive way of listening, on the contrary: it eludes the attentiveness that would have driven us toward that unreachable ideal. Then the walk extends as a monad, along the folds and unfolds of the environment, without any possibility of partitioning its continuity into fragments of meaning that would only be the product of an organizing imagination of the perceptual world. Such a method is not the application – conscious or not – of a knowledge, to which would correspond the production of objective data. Rather, it is the tactical construction of a situation of experience within indeterminacy, and the sound matter that is recorded is the result of a *phenomenon* rather than the production of a *document*: the result of the interaction between the environment and the body walking through it.

Although, the phenomenological approach – as Francisco López talks about or as we can find in the neutrality of Pierre Schaeffer's 'sound object'<sup>6</sup> – has to be relativized, because with the use of sound recording technology, we are once again held down by a predetermined discursive apparatus, which is not able to avoid completely the documentary recoding as it is, in its turn, partitioning reality, and with which we still have to negotiate. So, equipped with a technology for a memory – that is: a non-neutral discursive apparatus – and as an imperfect and culturally determined observer, what am I able to actually witness ?

The possibility of fidelity toward the object of my listening (like Murray Schafer defends) or of purity in my approach (to which many works of phonography pretend) becomes uncertain. Indeed, pretending to tell the truth of a place, as it would be objective (through the production of a faithful document) or essential (through the revelation of its veritable beauty), is only saying again the ideological truth of an imaginary preconception – it would be projecting my culturally determined subjectivity in the truth or the essence of my object. Furthermore, as my presence as an observer is not only a subjective determination but also an objective perturbation, it seems that the only thing I am able to record is the interaction between the body and the environment, that is to say the perturbation itself, as it constitutes the only *graspable event*.

Under that angle, the research I carried out in Nodar was an attempt to positivate the interaction, the perturbation: composing *with* the environment, without any cultural distinction of values between the sounds produced by my body walking and the near and far 'natural' sounds, but considering all of them as the *variations in intensity* of one sonic phenomenon.

Eventually, the composition I made in Nodar from the straight walks is not saying anything about Nodar. But it is the result of an indeterminate encounter of the environment and the body, and, in that sense, it exists only through Nodar, through an experience of the place, which results one *possible* landscape from the walk along the folds of the real landscape.

*Walking, listening, composing* – that is to say: reinventing a usage, reactivating perception, producing an *other* sense. All of which is related to a place, but which is about the construction of an *other* place, a possible place that will be, during the decontextualized listening of the sound work, the place for the acousmatic experience.

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<sup>6</sup> Voir Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des Objets Musicaux, essais interdiscipline*, Seuil, 1966.