

Friction/Intrusions

About *Furnica* by Olga Kokcharova

— Pali Meursault

Text originally published with the record Furnica, by Olga Kokcharova, on Speckled Tosche

Modern, humanistic Western philosophy since Kant and Descartes has established the idea that Nature is fundamentally unrelated to human experience, positioning our social lives above the animal kingdom and our cultural selves as the opposite of nature. It is a tour de force (and sleight of hand) for naturalist modernity to have rendered wild and ‘uncultivated’ spaces at the same time absolutely inhospitable and, for this very reason, entirely subject to our needs. Today, naturalism remains deeply embedded in our culture, so much so that the growing realization of the finitude of the world, the exhaustion of its resources, and the imminence of climate disaster seems inadequate, as much for unravelling the unaddressed ways in which the world is ordered from the moment it is perceived, as for questioning the legitimacy of the expansion and extraction which humans force upon their environment.

The successive radical environmental transformations have encouraged the emergence of environmentalist ideas. However, precisely because these ideas developed within a naturalist conceptual framework, one must admit that environmentalist movements have most of the time kept to a policy of reporting, compromising, and seeking compensation, leaving it to radical leftist ecosophers to tackle the naturalist, universalist, and capitalist ontologies underpinning modern cultures. And yet, if dialectical caution has indeed secured environmentalism’s position on the political stage, it has also incurred aporia: the environment must now be politicised, based on a naturalist thought that has excluded Nature from a political realm reserved for Cultural beings and manifestations of Culture. Ensnared by the naturalist dichotomy, environmentalism can only grant wilderness the status of a political space by right once the latter has been conquered or polluted, and grant the living the status of proper political question once it is exploited or patented. The new ‘green’ economy, which attempts to present the internalisation of environmental costs in the free market as a paradigm shift, does not make any difference: Nature remains an ideological or financial abstraction that materializes only when it is disappearing. Even if the naturalist ideology that supports these inadequate or harmful ways of thinking has not weakened as much as one would have hoped – given the attacks by critical anthropologies since Descola and radical environmentalisms since Guattari – perhaps we will soon get to celebrate an embittered victory, since naturalism carries within itself a basic principle that will be its own undoing: when there will be no Nature left, dichotomy will be out of season.

But since the point under consideration is creation, or cultural production, after making this too-brief, sweeping generalisation one must add the following: our contemplating and marvelling at the

world is as imbued with naturalism as is the cloning of sheep or fracking. The idea of ‘natural resources’ accommodates both speechless admiration and senseless exploitation.

It goes without saying that the environmental impact and the ethical justifications of painting in watercolour and drilling for oil are on an altogether different scale. And yet, in the West, cultural practices and ethical discourses since the Renaissance have continuously concurred to strengthen the naturalist dogma by colonising natural Nature through its availability in gardens, landscapes, and panoramas. Moreover, pictorial, literary, and musical art forms have actively contributed to the selective appointment of a few non-human lives and spaces, whose symbolic value (or the quality of their reflection in the mirror of anthropocentrism) made worthy of being extracted from the primordial chaos before being presented in the museum, heard at a concert, or narrated according to the rules of ideal perspective, harmony, or morality. Having thus sifted the importance of the world through modern aesthetic criteria, art could even be held responsible for having taught us to forget about most of the world: for this one majestic tree, how many prickly shrubs have we neglected? For that one summit, how many lowly marshes? For one songbird, how many inaudible invertebrates?

During the second half of the twentieth century and especially in North America, where Thoreau’s woodland contemplation found followers who often skipped the anarchism that was its guiding principle, sound art aesthetics inherited naturalist cultural codes and adapted them to the medium’s specificity. With Raymond Murray Schafer, the *vedute* of Renaissance painting became ‘soundscapes’ that implicitly dictated rules for framing, objectifying, and producing signs and symbolic values to structure the sonic manifestations of the world into a discourse about Nature. With Bernie Krause, the principles of harmony, musical forms, and orchestral hierarchy were essentialised into categories that permitted a ‘scientific’ description of the acoustic environment, even if it meant fiddling with the facts when they did not match one’s ideas... Although it is increasingly criticised, we are not yet done with this naturalism elevated to an ‘acoustic ecology’. Murray Schafer and Krause are more celebrated than ever: re-releases and exhibitions serve to discreetly advance essentialist, anthropocentric and outdated positions, occasionally promoting scientific approximations, and always submitting the complexity of the external world to pre-established ideological, aesthetic, and moral categories. It is nevertheless important to note that very early on others chose very different ways of approaching fieldwork. They confronted the otherness of non-human environments by initiating forms of exchange with undecipherable lives or by following the trails of incommensurable movements. Whether it is done through a scientific approach or through artistic fieldwork, the task of deconstructing the naturalist dogma and anthropocentric perception requires humility to counter certitude, critical reflexivity to counter idealism, and, often, a discreet stubbornness. Among the pioneers of sound art, one may think of David Dunn and his *entrainments* that initiate the possibility of inter-species musical experimentation, or Knud Viktor, whose sound amplifications eliminate instituted landscape perception in order to approach the limits of sensitivity. In terms of constructing subjectivity, this type of research takes the opposite trajectory from naturalism and acoustic ecology: rather than carrying out extractions to make the external world conform to a cultural ideal, the

point is to unlearn, to unravel established conventions so as to let new ways of perceiving or feeling emerge. This also entails accepting that the relationship initiated with the external world is always going to be unpredictable, sometimes incomprehensible, and necessarily unstable. In this respect, the works of Dunn and Viktor anticipate Baptiste Morizot's description of attention to non-human life forms: the necessary, ceaselessly renewed attempt to 'translate the untranslatable'.

Field recording practices – made popular in the 1990s when recording material became more portable – were often carried out in reference to the theoretical frameworks of bioacoustics, soundscape, and acoustic ecology. The ethical and aesthetic contradictions that ensued from equating technological ways with ways of the world are no doubt involved in the rapid erosion of the genre's forms and postures. So much so that while the turn of the century saw a craze for liner notes claiming the records were 'unaltered field recordings', fifteen years later some albums were amusingly 'guaranteed field-recording-free'. Indeed, field recording, too, had inherited naturalist certainties, passing over the contradictions between Nature and media to better establish the authenticity of acoustic phenomena domesticated at 44,100 samples per second, or the purity of a 'sense of place' turned into a fetish for GPS coordinates.

Despite field recording causing much irritation, amusement, and contempt over the past few years, it must be given some credit. Beyond theoretical references, this approach mainly based on field-work and the use of tools was widely taken up by defectors from either instrumental practice or fine art, those who wished to confront reality and whose thoughts, whose gestures were more guided by curiosity than conditioned by theoretical principles. Although they often remained attached to the idea of soundscape, many empirical or autodidactic attempts at field recording have in fact contributed to the deconstruction of modern landscape representation: by stepping inside the frame, feeling their way toward elusive manifestations, or instilling the act of listening with an electroacoustic materialism going beyond the audio-naturalist ethos. In this respect, recording ant hill activity became an opportunity to look for the point at which landscape certainties grow confused within an indecipherable murmuring life. Granted, field recording used the ant hill to excess; it became a 'thing' that practitioners exchanged, just like the welding of piezoelectric sensors or recommendations for moisture-resistant microphones, yet it allowed humming sounds to leave a lasting mark on auditory sensibility as a new musical possibility. By coming closer to the ant hill and some other favourite subjects, field recording turned the landscape's *horizon* into a *point of friction* with reality – a point that did not condense into a place, but a point where a living energy was liberated and perceptual habits were disrupted.

If this rapid and subjective appraisal of field recording practices relates to Olga Kokcharova, it is only insofar as, before the ant hill, her approach, her gestures and the technical equipment that mediates between the world and the work have certainly been informed by approaches, gestures and mediating acts performed earlier on by others. When listening to *Furnica* and her other works, however, it becomes abundantly clear that she intends (or perhaps needs) to break free from established references and practices in order to explore a darker side of the mediation of sensory experiences.

Ten years ago, Christian Zanési cleared Olga of the charge that she might belong to the trend of field recording, a movement whose vogue was already coming to an end, and which from the outset had probably presented to the electroacoustic composer an unfortunate tendency to talk too much about sources and not enough about sounds. On the radio station France Musique he could be heard reassuring the audience: ‘This is not at all a field recording type of work, the kind where an artist signs a landscape, says they recorded in this place on such and such a day, at such and such a time. That’s not at all what this is. This is purely about sound recorded very, very close up, close to the ears, as if under the microscope. And as it turns out, the outcome is a form of poetry and constant surprise.’ A decade later, it no longer matters whether Olga does field recording or not. And while one notes in passing that the problematic notion of ‘sound purity’, reformulated here in the terms of *Musique Concrète*, would be worth further examination, Zanési’s remark is of interest mainly because it proposes to abolish landscape by moving closer: listened to ‘under the microscope’, sound does not reveal another landscape, mycelial or microbial, but instead a poetic, surprising, inherent uncertainty. That is, perhaps, an ‘untranslatable’, in a work that constitutes a humble attempt at a – possible, transitory – translation, that never establishes itself as an unequivocal account, an overarching discourse, or a definite truth.

What motivates Olga’s approach, going ‘very, very close’, is a search for this point of friction with reality – or, rather, the *plural* points of friction *between* realities: where relationships between living beings, humans, ants, or plants generate noise by rubbing. A noise that’s everywhere and which results, if not from effective communication in the linguistic sense of the term, at least from the many untranslatable and yet tangible interrelations, interactions, and interdependencies between beings. ‘Noise’ here relates back to both the concrete dimension of sound and the mathematical term for what, as part of an approach aimed at a predefined objective, should be uncoupled from meaningful signals and removed from the focus of attention. To the contrary, tuning in to the indistinct noise of friction implies that one turns their attention to the innumerable humming sounds that do not signify *on the face of it*. As called for by the anthropologist Anna Tsing, such an approach involves deconstructing perceptual habits to learn new forms of sensitivity.

Olga states that she likes to use the term ‘friction’ and that she draws on the thought of Tsing. According to the anthropologist, who used that term as the title for her first book, this notion can describe both the destructions and the productions that result from the rubbing together of differences between powers, peoples, or beings. In contrast with naturalist environmentalism, which has yet to fully grapple with Nature as a political question, the way that Tsing uses the notion of friction to address the relationship between humans and their surroundings is part of a thoroughly political approach: she leads us to completely re-evaluate the effects of the relationships between the global and the periphery, or between humans and non-humans, according to other geographies, other scales, or other political temporalities. In a way, friction also allows us to problematise and politicise another notion, which critical anthropologists and environmentalists have often used to challenge the naturalist model: the notion of ‘relationship’. But whereas the idea of a relationship above all conjures up a positive form of attention to the world, an attention to be (re)built by sometimes

drawing on other cosmologies, friction reminds us that, in reality, we continuously engage with the world, even if we wish we could keep it at a conceptual distance. And if, the vast majority of the time, it is a relationship that is asymmetrical, predatory, colonial, and toxic, it can also, less frequently, give way to unexpected forms of encounter, of common creation, moments of inter-species diplomacy or co-evolutive invention.

Furnica very literally makes friction audible. This piece has little in common with the mass of previous field recordings of ant hills because the artist does not attempt to make a portrait, she does not expect to conjure up the sonic authenticity of a natural manifestation, but prefers to replace it by an undecidable phenomenon that involves equally the ants' legs and the recorder's printed circuits. Since its subject is the relationships that form between living beings and objects, rather than their identity or essence, *Furnica* leads us to question the impermeability of the naturalist dichotomy, even in its reiteration by Krause. The segmentation proposed by the bio-acoustician, who organises the audible world into a human realm (*anthropophony*), an animal realm (*biophony*) and a geoclimatic realm (*geophony*) goes hand in hand with the ideal of a wild Nature that is essentially separated from human life. Now, although there is no evidence left for the existence of a nature untouched by anthropic interference, naturalist aesthetics unceasingly returns to this image even if this means having to discreetly make use of montage techniques when the recorded material is not enough to conjure up the vision.

To the contrary, the recording on *Furnica* is certainly *raw*, but the phenomenon is in no way *pure*. It cannot be identified as a place, attributed to any animal behaviour or identity, or even reduced to the medium or to technical failure. Something did happen, but it both goes beyond the 'that-has-been' of the recorded document (besides, what would ethology do with such evidence?) and shatters any landscape evocation (is a landscape still possible when there is no room left for a point of view?). Uncertain, yet nevertheless tangible, a sound produced by the friction between two worlds does not show living things and objects so much as the *event* of their encounter. That is, here: the result of accidental circumstances that are impossible to reproduce identically, confronting us with the autonomy and unpredictability of the living, without calling upon established representations. What we hear therefore stands outside of categories and it blurs their boundaries. It's not so much about the voice of a new character with a hybrid identity (insect-cyborg, electric ant chimera) than it is about the echo of the relationship, of friction itself: *the rumble of a geopolitical confrontation on the scale of a microcosm on a plot of forest ground.*

We are able to walk so fine a line because the artist is willing to step into the certainties of the landscape view, she dares to stand there with the impurity of her electrified world, to get very, very close to an otherness. But what also makes this an event is the fact that *Furnica* is an accidental recording and carries within itself this fragile honesty that comes with the unexpected. Can this be heard when playing the record, or is it just what I want to believe? Be that as it may, there is no doubt that if the gesture of giving her equipment up to the ants was reiterated, the event would soon

turn into a ritual and a performance, an audio-naturalist reminder of how punk once was the destruction of guitars on stage.

The artist herself needed some time and some hindsight to convince herself that the event had well and truly happened, and for the violence of the technological intrusion into the ant hill to give way to the violence which permeates the listening experience, and which changes how we pay attention to the world. Now it is our turn to listen, the recording does convey a certain violence, but we become aware along the way that it is not so much due to the ants—who are only sounding the endless stubbornness of the living—but rather to the mediating device, whose presence we had learned to forget, and which suddenly bursts in. As both a lens and a mirror, it reflects not only a landscape distorted by the failing equipment, but also an image of the world superimposed with our own reflection. *Furnica*, then, reminds us that all our contemplations, our narratives, our representations through images or sounds should also be opportunities to feel the ground beneath our feet and to exchange with our surroundings all sorts of confused energies – energies and rubbing, friction and intrusions that burst through ideal perspective, harmony, or morality, and whose intensities cannot be subject to the control of the naturalist, universalist, and capitalist systems of thought.