

Gilles Aubry

Ausgabe #7
November 2017

Scientific experiments with documenting and archiving sound resulted in the creation of diverse techniques which were eventually used beyond the sciences, too. By addressing the poetics and politics of scientific sound archives an institution comes into focus which is at the intersection of art and science. While Viktoria Tkaczyk analyzed sound recordings from the perspective of cultural studies, Gill Aubry presented his artistic work with sound archives. Here, the evening is documented by photographs, documentation of Gilles Aubry's works and the transcription of Aubry's lecture.

Transcription of „Attuning to sound archives“ presentation by Gilles Aubry

Aubry: As a starting point, I just wanted to mention a couple of the general approach strategies I have with archives. There's no big surprise in this approach; it's mostly when I'm invited to work with specific archives, I at least have to study a little bit beforehand to get more familiar with the material. The way to approach this material of course relates to existing studies, such is the case of the Lautarchiv works, which have been done by scholars who relate to cultural and historical studies of the material, or post-colonial studies, because of the origin of the material. The epistemological approach is of course always a topic related to the notion of knowledge: What kind of knowledge is embedded in the document? And how was it produced, by whom, and for whom? Of course all these questions are very common in connection with documents. Another important aspect is the material approach, which is directly related to the various media which are present in the archives. Sometimes there are several generations of sound media, which are used to capture sound and maybe also preserve the original recording with the help of another technology. So this material approach basically covers all the techniques and the technologies involved in the recording, listening, semination, and aggregation of sound. And in all those fields I am not an expert. I can only, you know, rely on other people's work, which is great, it's still sort of important for my work, it informs, it situates, it contextualizes the material.



Fig. 1.
 Robert Patz: Gilles Aubry presenting, 2017.
 Digital photography.
 CC-BY-NC Robert Patz

How can I contribute as someone who comes from music, from sound art? Of course, the main aspect is listening. It's interesting for the case of the Lautarchiv: Sometimes I wonder to what extent these recordings have been listened to after they were made. The question is for me, what can we learn, but also experience today, through listening to the documents. So the notion of experience becomes important, which is closely related to this idea of attunement and maybe imagination. And which may be different, or is complementary, to the notion of knowledge for example, or epistemological study.

But that's just background information. I'm going to start with the presentation of a work, which is called *From A to Om* from 2015, which was made for an exhibition. The latest stage was presented at the exhibition *Digging Deep, Crossing Far* at Bethanien in Berlin last September. For the first version of the exhibition, which took place in Bangalore in India, I made this first installation. It is related to the Lautarchiv, more specifically to recordings of prisoners of war. We are talking about the First World War. And in that case about Indian prisoners, perspectivevely Indo British prisoners. Their voices were recorded by linguists and music scientists at the time. I hope you are a bit familiar with this archive, I don't have the time to add so much information on top of what Viktoria ¹ has already explained. It actually started in 1915, in the case of these recordings, and lasted until 1918. But to come back to my approach to it, I was in the beginning a little bit uncomfortable because the first step of the exhibition would happen in India, but before that, I knew I wouldn't have the opportunity to engage with or listen to these documents together with people in India. So I basically had to come up with a work without having this possibility, which was a bit problematic to me, because it is usually quite important to engage in such a situation. I had no other choice than to focus on what was available in Berlin. I went to the archive at the Humboldt University and most naturally I started to focus. Of course I listened to the recordings and I read some of the translations, but I felt sort of unqualified to engage directly with the content of these recordings. Especially culturally, of course. So I did focus on this material, and on epistemological aspects, and I guess the main element which I started to work with was the so-called reference tone. This is a tone which was played at the end of each recording in order to enable scientific use of such recordings. As you know, at that time the gramophones didn't have a standard recording speed or playback speed, so this tone was needed to make the tuning during playback

possible afterwards. I have brought here a little peach pipe [peach pipe sound], which is pretty much similar to the one that was used at the time to play this tone, this A-tone - this frequency of 435 hertz -, which was recorded at the end of each recording in order to match playback afterwards. Closely related to that diapason is the "Stimmgabel", of course another scientific instrument to measure tones. What also caught my attention in this archive was of course the forms for each of the recordings with information about each prisoner's borough, which also contain the comments, the appreciations of the German scientists about the voices.

I also found additional elements in the archive, like slides of x-rays, images of the skull, and the speech apparatuses of humans, which were produced in order to study the position of the tongue and other parts for enunciation. So these were pretty much the elements I focused on for this work. I'm going to show you a short video documentation of the installation in Bangalore [...]. #00:41:58-5#

<...>

From A to OM - WWI Indian prisoners voice recordings (2015; Installation at the Goethe Institute Bangalore, December 3 to 5, 2015, for the Digging Deep, Crossing Far group exhibition.)
<http://www.earpolitics.net/projects/from-a-to-om-reseting-the-epistemological-frame-of-wwi-indian-prisoners-recordings/>

#00:47:21-4#

Aubry: I think this is a good impression. It was necessary to listen to the whole record, which is part of this installation. To clarify a little bit what I did: I decided to use two different diapasons. One corresponds to this original frequency, the 435 hertz, the sort of concert a from the time - today it's like 450 hertz, but at the time it was 435 hertz. [...] I added to that a second diapason, which had a different frequency - the so-called Om frequency, which does not correspond to the pitch of the scale, of the tempered scale. It is used more as an esoteric treatment, body treatment basically, with the idea that this particular frequency will resonate in your body if you use that diapason on your skin. So, this particular frequency has a completely different reference attached to it, and my proposal for this installation was to suggest a switch, or transposition, of one context to another one, a sort of arbitrary one. I called that transposition from one episteme to another one. As a matter of fact, you would hear these two frequencies continuously in the room. In addition to that, I have edited a record based on one recording from the archive, the voice of Chote Singh who is singing a song, and I've taken this recording and made it go slower, progressively become slower in the computer in order to match the reference tone with the second diapason. That means, at the beginning, one hears the original reference tone at 435 hertz, it is in tune with the first diapason, and in the end, it was probably more clear to hear in this documentation, it matched the second diapason. And on top of that, you can hear the voice going down, which creates a little paradox, because the record player keeps playing at the same speed, so you hear this typical sound of a record slowing down, but the record plays through, so there's already kind of a little irritation between the visual and the sound level. But if this recording loses its scientific value when it's played at a different speed, then what else can it become, basically? It's an open door into something else, which I didn't want to define any further.

Maybe it is interesting just on top of that, that this voice which you could hear is a synthetic voice from the Google website with a British accent. And every minute this voice enunciates an excerpt of some of these scientists' appreciations of the voices, which I also found weird in the sense that many times they are not very descriptive, but they are more appreciative, in the sense that they say „this voice is strong enough“, or „too weak“, or „consonant enough“. This „enough“ was never really clear, what it is referring to exactly. Enough for what? Is it compared to the canon of an ideal, or is it maybe also for recording? Because at that time, recording a voice was not an easy challenge and it needed indeed strong voices. These elements taken apart would enable an interesting situation in the installation room by bringing them together, but at the same time they are specialized, so they keep their autonomy.

#00:52:18-2#

The next installation which I made for the more recent exhibition in Berlin is still part of the same project, *Digging Deep, Crossing Far*. I focused on something even more specific. It was still the same topic, the Lautarchiv, but I became interested in the process of digitization of these recordings, which took place in 2004 in Berlin. I was curious how they did that, so I contacted the engineer who was commissioned to do it. Of course, the question was how to deal with records recorded at different speeds. All of them had this reference tone, so when you digitize them you have to make a decision whether you just use one turntable with one speed, play each record, and digitize it as it sounds, or whether you adjust the playback speed for each record in order to match this ideal frequency of 435 hertz. In that case, it's what they decided to do. They chose, so to say, the scientific way, so that in the end the digital files that were generated were all in the same speed. I mean, they already had all the correct speed for scientific analysis. So I was curious how it would sound, because so far I didn't have access to the original records, I only had access to the digital files. So I said, okay, I would like to re-record the original records, but without correcting the playback speed. I was allowed to select a few ones, and I also had access to this documentation, which is a bit out of focus here, but it shows which speed correction was necessary for each of the recordings. You can see, maybe at the bottom on the right a bit more clearly, you see a reference number each time, the PK number of the recording, and next to it a value in percent. For example, in the last one it's -1.5%. That means, that for this recording the engineer had to correct the playback speed of the turntable to -1.5%. So I [...] looked for those who had a big correction percentage and I selected sixteen recordings. I just re-digitized them by playing them back on the turntables, but without correcting the speed. I ended up with a collection of reference tones, which gave the name to the piece.



Fig. 2.
Robert Patz: Viktoria Tkaczyk presenting, 2017.
Digital photography.
CC-BY-NC Robert Patz

I also became interested in the shellac, the material itself, which was used at the time to generate the copies of the records. I guess it was recorded on wax discs, and then, through this process that you described,² they made the negative of it and with that they could generate copies. Shellac is an interesting material. It has a relatively long history; it comes from bugs – special insects that produce this material with their bodies by sucking sap from specific trees. They are very tiny insects, and they are harvested by farmers almost exclusively in India and Thailand, probably also a couple of other places in the world, but mostly there. As a matter of fact, shellac was very useful to record sound, it was hard enough and had all the qualities that the record industry needed at the time. But it was also part of a colonial trade system, obviously. That means that this material was sent to Europe for pressing the discs. At least in the beginning, later on it was pressed also in India, but we can see how these material aspects are embedded in, or part of the history of the collection. So I went to Bremen to the, so they say, last existing shellac factory. It's called Stroever GmbH. They let me visit it, but they didn't let me document it, so I can't show you the inside. They produce shellac, not anymore for records, but for the pharma industry and food industry, cosmetics. But the material is still the same. So I came back with a couple of samples of shellac, how it is produced and refined today, how it's sold on the market. That means in different colors and qualities and shapes: mostly flakes. The story of this company itself would also be interesting to research, they have a long history. You can see here that it was established in 1893, so there is a continuity, and they certainly have an interesting archive, too. They are about to write their own history, but it'd be interesting how they intend to do that. #00:58:42-8#

The installation for Berlin was in a way even more simple than the previous one: You had eight unique records in the space with different reference tones on each side, so sixteen in total. And then in the room there were three turntables, each one connected to one loudspeaker, so basically people were invited to play these records, with the possibility to compare these reference tones and to combine them. In addition, I also presented one of the original formula, one of the original diapasons from the Lautarchiv, and the shellac samples. You can see that in this documentation, which I'm not extremely happy about. #00:59:42-1#

<...>

Tone Collection (2016; Installation (vinyl, turntables, loudspeakers, mirrors, shellac, tuning fork, gloves, form); commissioned for the Exhibition *Digging Deep, Crossing Far*, Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin, Sep 9 - Nov 13, 2016.) <http://www.earpolitics.net/projects/tone-collection/>

#01:02:16-5#

Aubry: Well, I guess you get the principle of this installation. I mean, so far it is funny, because I'm interested in how important it is to have people listen to these things, and there you can't see anybody in this documentation. Of course, there were some visitors in the exhibitions and maybe for clarity I did it like that. But it's also interesting to see how these works - I mean my own understanding of the works - evolved with time. Because, for example, this last one seemed a bit dry, it's very formal how it looks like in the room. But I had, in fact, many enthusiastic feedbacks, I guess also because of its playful character and the fact that people were allowed to touch the record and engage with it. And that's interesting because I think that something that was originally intended as something very specific and epistemological, somehow, you know, all these details of the scientific character of these materials become also something for the non-expert. And I guess that's a very important aspect, this idea, we could call it "against expert listening". That's where maybe something important can take place.

Because I've already talked too long, I will just briefly mention my work with another archive. Or at least a collection of music recordings, from 1959. It's a collection of Moroccan music made by Paul Bowles, who was an American writer and composer. He traveled all over the country in '59, that means three years after independence, in order to record and preserve all kinds of traditional music in Morocco. This collection ended up in Washington at the library of Congress and re-surfaced in 2010 in order to be digitized again, and returned as digital copy to Tangier, where I got access to it. I found this document interesting, maybe especially to start with, because of the notes that came along with the recordings. Paul Bowles as a writer, as an artist, had a very specific approach to recording, and he did not follow the scientific rules of an ethnographer. He had his very own way of doing this project. And that's what makes it interesting for me to work with today - because it's full of problems, but it's also full of qualities. Basically, I thought it would be interesting to travel with copies of these recordings back to some of the original recording locations to try to find some of the original musicians, which I did together with a Moroccan artist, Zouheir Atbane, who is a performer from Casablanca. We started together, we went to Taфраout #01:05:48-4#

a small town in the Middle Atlas Mountains, with the corresponding recordings. We spent some time there that resulted in a first output of this project, which was called "And who sees the mystery". It was an installation, basically a sort of video essay, that we presented in an exhibition during the Marrakech Biennale. This is, in a way, based on a more classical cultural studies idea to create a space for a response from people who have been approached as subalterns in an operation like this. I mean through the Bowles-Recordings, and just to basically create the conditions for a response 60 years later. We did that, and we found a couple of people who were still alive, who were part of these recordings. I'll just play you an excerpt. #01:07:20-0#

<...>

and who sees the mystery (2014, film and installation (2 videos (27:00 and 2:00), 6 loudspeakers, chairs, notes, curtains); Marrakech Biennale 2014.) <http://www.earpolitics.net/projects/and-who-sees-the-mystery-2014/>

#01:09:17-1#

Aubry: I stop here because of time. But as you can see, there are a couple of expected answers, and maybe a couple of more surprising ones. Actually, the fact that he says „well, had we known that we were recorded we would actually play better“, is kind of surprising. And in fact, the encounter with this man was really extremely interesting and fascinating. But of course the film tries to put that together with other aspects. We've been collaborating also with other musicians and poets in Taфраout. #01:10:01-6#

Now, towards the conclusion, I want to present a couple of ideas related to what else might be, to take the words of Salome Voegelin, who is an author I'm reading now. I'm quite influenced by her writing, she writes about sound and listening in her book "Sonic Possible Worlds". She very much focuses on this idea of listening as a way to engage with reality, but in a way that maybe allows to consider its plurality and its complexity. So this idea of "possible worlds" is clearly an attempt to engage with alternative versions of the world, but not only imaginary ones that exist just in a parallel to the real world. It really also explores the connections with what is called the "actual world". This, to me, situates the fact that after this very much influenced, cultural studies, epistemological interest, there is still the need for some other approaches. And the need for further diversification of sound studies is just obvious. It's too much of a white male discipline, an especially Western one, too. So it needs to be diversified, both in terms of content, but also in terms of voices, of authors. And that's not specific to archives, that's more valid for all the research that is currently being made on sound. It's just important to mention, because in the case of the Lautarchiv for example, I still miss some responses from people, who'd have a maybe more direct cultural relationship to some of these voices. We are talking about the Indian prisoners, or the Pakistani prisoners, or Northern African ones. So I think it's still to be done to share these recordings with various kinds of people, that could be found there, or maybe elsewhere. But to engage with listening to this material. And that's something that of course can bring something more to what already exists in terms of critique of this type of archive. And then, the "against expert listening", which means, the more personal ways of engaging through listening to recorded sounds for example, which also relates to the idea of not only trying to read the documents, but to experience them, to inhabit them, as Voegelin would say. Even more ambitiously, the idea maybe of "decolonizing listening", which in that case is closely related to the idea of "decolonizing thought", that means it is not decolonizing in the historical sense only, but really in the sense of basically going to the roots of Western thought and its history. Maybe trying to question those roots and engaging with an enterprise of destabilization and decentering of the whole paradigms of science and philosophy. So it's very ambitious, there are some authors who have made some important steps towards these directions, like Viveiros de Castro, who is a specialist of Amazonian indigenous thought, and he made some strong statements towards such ideas. Also, in anthropology, Eduardo Coen, with his book about how forests think, and a very intriguing ethnography of the Amazonian population, who also insists on the important role of listening - with sentences such as „What other voices

resonate when voice is decoupled from speech“. It clearly means that not only human beings can speak, but possibly also other kinds of beings, non-human, or all kinds of entities. So it opens up a lot of possibilities for listening. I would like to show just one image. It’s basically Zouheir performing with some of the material we’ve been researching with, and I think it’s enough to just see him with headphones, you know, which of course represent the fact of listening to these archives, and the fact that he’s presenting it to the audience. So in this excerpt, which has no sound, it’s the body, which becomes the center of the research, and the idea that by giving access to these archives to other people, maybe a transformative moment can happen. Thank you. #01:16:49-6#



Fig. 3.
Robert Patz: Viktoria Tkaczyk and Gilles Aubry discussing with
Christina Dörfling, 2017.
Digital photography..
CC-BY-NC Robert Patz

- 1 Viktoria Tkaczyk introduced the Lautarchiv in her talk at the same evening. For more information visit the Lautarchiv homepage: <https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/einfuehrung>.
- 2 Gilles Aubry refers to Viktoria Tkaczyk's talk. For more information: <https://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/bestaende-und-katalog/bestaende/>