FIELD RECORDING, ABITARE IL SUONO

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There is an illuminating quote from Brian Eno, a leading figure in ambient music, which neatly explains the concept of field recording—that is, the recording of sounds emanating from the surrounding environment. Following a serious accident in 1975 in which he was hit by a car, the artist was convalescing at home and listening to a harp music album that a friend had brought him.

He recalls that the volume was very low, almost imperceptible, and that the sound blended perfectly with the rustle of the rain and the colour of the light: "I felt,' he would say, 'that it was becoming an integral part of the surrounding environment."

In essence, this marks the aesthetic foundations of his so-called ambient music, later realised in the renowned 'Ambient' album series launched in 1979 with *Music for Airports*, a milestone of the genre, an album designed to transform the atmosphere of airports through suspended, non-intrusive sounds, at once negligible or capable of capturing the listener's attention depending on their state of mind. Specifically, that album did not feature actual field recordings, rather the music was structured as a soundscape designed to incorporate surrounding sound sources, thereby fostering a genuine acoustic atmosphere.

They would, however, emerge on the album *On Land*, the fourth and final instalment of the series, one of Brian Eno's works closest to the world of field recording, utilising various sound sources—from animals, inanimate objects and field recordings made during a trip to Ghana—all processed electronically, with the aim of evoking imaginary landscapes.

In this way, field recording did not simply become sound documentation, but compositional material.

The sounds of the world - wind, water, urban traffic, animal calls, distant voices - could thus be integrated into the music without any hierarchy between 'musical sound' and 'noise', and with the music designed to coexist with the environment rather than dominate it; as, moreover, already well demonstrated by the composer John Cage, who was not a field recordist in the classical sense of the term but was instrumental in introducing the idea that any sound from the environment can become music. And whilst many of his works incorporate real sounds, emanating for example from a radio or the surrounding environment, in *4'33"*, one of his best-known pieces, the artist plays nothing for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, as the title states, yet allowing that apparent silence to become sound, filled by the noises of the hall.

Cage thus liberates sound from traditional structure, and in this he is very similar, for example, to an artist such as Cy Twombly, who would liberate the mark from representation. It is no coincidence that both were part of the American avant-garde scene of the 1950s - linked also to the world of Black Mountain College, where Cage was a central figure - and both shared a radical way of rethinking mark, gesture and perception.

Just as Cage allows the surrounding environment to flood and infuse the score, Twombly's 2005 series of Bacchus paintings comes to life through sudden brushstrokes, splashes and curved lines that evoke notes and vibrations. Each stroke almost refers to an isolated sound that nevertheless contributes to the overall harmony.

In essence, Twombly's lines, his erasures or repetitions behave almost like sonic improvisations, revealing themselves in this respect to be very close to Cage's idea of uncontrolled music.

The canvas or paper is thus transformed into a score; it can almost be heard, with the swirling red lines of the Bacchus works or the stormy brushstrokes of *Hero and Leandro*, created between 1981 and 1984, which end up resembling surges of sound, or with the subtle variations of the Blackboard paintings that seem almost to resonate, emerging from the silence and then dissolving into a background noise or with those repeated marks in so many works that seem to follow their own precise rhythm amidst layers of lines that become continuous echoes and empty spaces to be filled with the sound of the surrounding environment – as in Cage's case.

And just as the field recordist records and captures the external sound of the environment in its immediacy and unpredictability, Twombly records his own internal gesture, the movement of the hand exactly as it happens, immediate and non-narrative. Just as a recorder preserves a sound at the very moment it is produced.

Today the interweaving of ambient sound with electronic and other musical genres is almost the norm. Originally, however, it was a largely educational approach born with the arrival of Thomas Edison's phonograph, capable of recording and reproducing sounds. One thinks of Ludwig Koch, a German who emigrated to Britain, who as early as 1889, at the age of eight, made the first known recording of a bird's trill.

Koch devoted himself to recording and cataloguing the sounds of nature, becoming a prominent radio presenter for the BBC and helping to build the broadcaster's library of natural sounds. Later, portable phonographs would enable an American ethnographer and ethnomusicologist such as Frances Densmore to document the songs and music of many Native American peoples for over fifty years using wax cylinders.

In 1924, the phonograph was also used by the composer Ottorino Respighi to incorporate the recorded song of a nightingale into a movement of *I Pini di Roma*, his symphonic poem, a practice that was absolutely innovative for the time and the first of its kind in music.

With the advent of tape recorders, field recording became, above all, a means of documenting music in the field, particularly through the work of the American ethnomusicologist and record producer Alan Lomax, who documented forms of popular music including blues and gospel, and was the first to introduce and record folk and blues musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Muddy Waters and Lead Belly. He also devoted himself to documenting traditional sounds in various parts of the world, collaborating, for example, in Italy with the ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella.

Sounds of a completely different kind would feature in 1930's *Wochenend*e, the work of the German director and experimental filmmaker Walter Ruttmann, who, drawing on cinematic imagery, superimposed field recordings of urban traffic, the sounds of moving trams and the voices of passers-by onto optical film.

The aim was to convey – without resorting to images – the sounds of a weekend in Berlin. Ruttmann's work, considered a fundamental contribution to the development of sound collages, would anticipate the creative use of ambient sounds without, however, yet systematising them and transforming them into a musical language, as concrete music – formalised in France by Pierre Schaeffer – would do years later.

This was the moment when, after the Second World War, field recording burst onto the scene of sound experimentation, with real, concrete sound—recorded and manipulated in the studio—no longer merely documentation but becoming musical material to be organised into compositional form.

A prime example is *Étude aux chemins de fer* from 1948, the first work of musique concrète, in which the clattering of a train or the whistle of a conductor are transformed into an entirely new musical language. With this work and later in his collaborations with Pierre Henry, Schaeffer demonstrated how sound could be broken down, modified and reassembled to generate a musical narrative independent of the classical instrumental tradition. In short, a new alphabet from which new languages could spring, as Henry himself would emphasise.

Both were obviously aware of the insights of Luigi Russolo, who in his 1913 Futurist manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, proposed expanding musical material to include the soundscape of contemporary life, thus anticipating the idea that any sound could become the subject of composition. Although Russolo did not use recording and although he made use of the 'Intonarumori', the instrument he had invented to produce and control artificial noises, he would thus prove to be a fundamental precursor of concrete music.

A field that, from the 1950s onwards, would also inspire a so-called 'concrete pop music', with tracks ranging from Spike Jones to Pink Floyd, from the Beach Boys to the Beatles, from the Temptations to the world of hip hop, all filled with sound effects and unusual noises. Even cinema was not immune to Schaeffer's insights, with Ennio Morricone's soundtracks, for example, brimming with sounds drawn from the real world.

A further impetus to the development of field recording came in the late 1960s with the World Soundscape Project by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, an international research project aimed at studying the acoustic ecology of specific places through the use of field recordings.

Schafer introduced the concept of the soundscape, understood as the interplay between environment, society and perception, thereby transforming field recording into a critical and cognitive tool.

Essentially, through the analysis of acoustic contexts, the aim was to understand how sounds define the identity of a place.

This is the premise on which Hildegard Westerkamp, also Canadian, will work. She is associated with the world of electroacoustics and is also a key figure in the World Soundscape Project.

Westerkamp transforms the experience of listening to soundscapes into immersive musical compositions with a powerful emotional impact; in her work, recorded environmental sounds are selected, organised, and sometimes processed, but always in such a way as to maintain a strong connection with the place and context from which they originate, giving rise to sonic architectures that narrate environments, time and the relationships between listener and place.

And then there is Bernie Krause, a pioneer of bioacoustics and natural soundscapes who has recorded ecosystems around the world, introducing concepts such as biophony—that is, the sounds of animals—geophony, sounds relating to natural elements, and anthropophony, sounds relating to human beings. Among Krause's successors is Chris Watson, a leading figure in field recording and an artist with a strong focus on natural ecosystems and animals.

Whilst the former uses sound to analyse and explain ecosystems through montages designed to reveal the dynamics of the environment and its acoustic landscape, the latter employs ambient sound to evoke an immersive experience.

A former member of Cabaret Voltaire, a British experimental group that anticipated the industrial sound scene, over the years Chris Watson—also inspired by Schafer and Westerkamp—has produced works in which field recording combines ecological documentation

with artistic value, keeping natural sounds faithful to the original and using electronics solely to organise them without altering their timbre.

The radical manipulations of Francisco López, Jana Winderen and Lawrence English are of a completely different nature, through which field recording becomes fully integrated into the language of contemporary electronic music.

In López's work, for example, recorded sounds are decontextualised and transformed until they become abstract, often unrecognisable material.

In Winderen's work, however, advanced technologies and electronic interventions serve to make normally inaccessible environments—such as underwater ones—audible, integrating recording and sound processing.

Finally, English combines field recording and electronic composition, layering and manipulating sounds to create dense, enveloping soundscapes. In this way, field recording is no longer merely documentation or ecological listening, but becomes an integral part of an electronic score, in which the sounds of reality are transformed, reworked and incorporated into contemporary compositional structures.

Take, for example, *Eternal Stalker*, an album on which English collaborates with Merzbow, Masami Akita's Japanese noise project, blending sounds recorded in an industrial complex with extreme electronic manipulations.

On the album *I Had Myself a Nuclear Spring*, the Australian Kate Carr, a leading figure in contemporary field recording, recorded in the marshy areas surrounding a nuclear power station in France, creating, through electrical hums and shrill bird calls, a dystopian and apocalyptic atmosphere.

The album was released in 2015 on a USB stick housed in a tin box designed to evoke the lead-lined casings used for the disposal of nuclear waste. Equally unsettling is the NYC Sounds COVID-19 project with the musician Geoff Gersh, who roamed the neighbourhoods of New York recording ambient sounds and noises that emerged during the pandemic, a period in which – with so many musicians forced into isolation – there was a proliferation of field recordings and subsequent albums.

And so on to the albums in the *Earthphonia* series by Max Casacci, guitarist with Subsonica, in which sounds taken from natural environments or urban spaces are processed electronically.

And then there is *Tracing Basalt in the Onsernone Valley*, a sound project in which Pablo Diserens and Ludwig Berger transform the Swiss valley into a living instrument, blending ambient recordings with acoustic research.

Over the decades, field recording has progressively evolved in its practices and meanings, redefining its characteristics and altering its approaches and aims.

A record series such as *Environments*, released between 1969 and 1979 by Irv Teibel, one of the best-known American field recordists, would, for example, anticipate the appeal of the New Age soundscape for ambient sound through the manipulation of recordings of natural sounds. Teibel aimed to create continuous artificial soundscapes, designed to influence perception and the psychophysical state, promoting sleep, relaxation or concentration.

And so it continued until the insights – of a completely different nature and intent – of experimental artists and groups such as Fennesz or Matmos, of Italian artists such as Michele Spanghero or David Tidoni, and of historic pioneers of more pop-oriented electronic music such as the British duo KLF, who in 1990 released an album like *Chill Out*, which helped introduce the general public to the world of field recordings whilst formalising the ambient house genre. Much later, Björk's 2017 album *Utopia* incorporated birdsong recorded

by the artist herself in Venezuela or sampled from a 1973 record by Jean C. Roché, one of the pioneers in the field of natural sound recording. Field recording thus reveals itself to be a constantly evolving sonic universe, in a constant and imaginative balance between art and research, capable of continually broadening our way of perceiving and inhabiting sound and the environment.