Glacial Music: Katie Paterson's *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007)
By Alexander Rehding

Glaciers are noisy things. They glug and pop, screech and sing, hiss and buzz, they crackle, clink, and fizzle. Environmental art has long discovered the hypnotic magic of the gigantic slow-moving icy mountain rivers, and sound art among them. Artists such as Jana Winderen, Philip Samarzis, Thomas Köner, Eliza Bozek, Chris Watson, or Susan Schuppli only scratch the surface of those who have engaged creatively with the icy, windy, and watery sounds captured at glaciers between Novaya Zemlya and New Zealand.[1] From minimally edited, lengthy sound collages to ambient synth against a backdrop of soothing nature sounds, recordings of arresting glacier music have earned their place as a staple of sound art.

Their importance has only gained in recent years in light of global warming, as environmental organizations warn that half of the 215,000 glaciers outside of Antartica and Greenland will have disappeared by the end of the century, that is, during the lifetime of many of our children. News flashes of glaciers vanishing at alarming rates in the Himalaya, in Africa, the Arctic, the US and Europe reach us with such frequency that many of us have become dulled to their impact, though they have lost none of their seriousness. No less important issues than the future of drinking water and sea level rise are directly affected by the health of our glaciers. In the not-too-distant future, their lively zapping and gurgling will be a thing of the past.

Are glacier sounds an aesthetic or an environmental phenomenon? A bit of both: as with a lot of art based on environmental recordings, the line between documentation and composition is moveable. A lot of sound art explicitly assumes its role as a historical record, in a future archive, preparing for the time when the last glacier has melted and when these noises no longer exist. This is in fact exactly in line with R. Murray Schafer's foundational ideas about what he dubbed the "soundscape" in the late 1960s, a term that grew out of the environmental movement but has long transcended it, and describes an aestheticized experience of site-specific

surround-sound. He spent much of his efforts in the 1970s mapping soundscapes – most famously the Vancouver bay – to counter their disappearance (Schafer 1994). Admittedly, Schafer's concerns remain firmly embedded in the world of sound: he considers sound pollution the worst problem of our times, which, with the benefit of fifty years of hindsight, seems outright quaint. He does make it clear, however, that he regards a changing soundscape as symptomatic of larger changes in society and in the world we inhabit. In Schafer's universe, protecting endangered sounds is not qualitatively different from protecting endangered species: one is directly connected to the other in his sonic ecology.[2]

In some cases, particularly in art with an explicitly ecological message, the impetus is to foster a sense of future nostalgia, to create a reason for why we should protect this sonic environment – why we should *care*. Like Roland Barthes in his famous reflections on photography, for whom every snapshot whispers: "you will have been," the soundscape exists forever in the future perfect; it captures a scenario that existed at the moment of its recording, but will only be preserved into the future thanks to recording technology (Barthes 1982, p. 115). This kind of nostalgia, by the way, needn't lead to passivity. It is entirely possible to endow these feelings of impending loss with a renewed sense of activism, a call to action.[3]

In other cases, the motivation may be more purely sonic: the iridescent, changeable noises may have an intrinsic beauty. Timothy Morton, the punk philosopher of the environment, has made a case specifically for the aesthetic aspects of ecology. He argues that it's not sufficient for environmental art to present data, no matter how shocking, but it must also work as art – it must offer an *aesthetic* experience (Morton 2022, p. 57–58). Specifically, the kind of environmental art Morton dreams of should be about *data-ness*, the "qualities we experience when we apprehend something." In analogy with the comedian Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness," i.e. the subjective feeling that something *should* be true (irrespective of whether it is so), data-ness conveys a feeling of solidarity with that which has been

given (literally, the "data").

Either way, whichever way we are leaning – toward the documentary end or the aesthetic in the spectrum of environmental sound art– the interest is in making people *listen up*.

Among these glacier-based sound works, the artwork *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull* (2007) by the Scottish artist Katie Paterson stands out. Paterson identifies as a visual artist, but this is not the full story. She is a conceptual artist who is concerned with the position of the human in the universe. While past generations of artists and aestheticians would immediately think of the sublime here, this is not entirely wrong: Paterson's interest is to bring down the unfathomable temporal and spatial dimensions of the universe to human proportions that we can grasp and process, while salvaging a sense of wonder and awe. Her work typically cuts across multiple sensory dimensions, makes use of science and technology, and has an unfailing engaging, often quirky, quality. She has presented performance of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* that has been beamed up to the moon and back, and sounds a little worse for wear after this long journey, has turned all the solar eclipses witnessed by humankind into a kind of cosmic disco ball, or has strung up fossil records from all periods of earth-bound life, rounded into beads, into a necklace that embraces our planet on a geological scale.[4]

Paterson's interest in glaciers goes back to her time in art school: the work with which she graduated was *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007–08), which features a cell phone number that connects the viewer to a live phone line with a hydrophonic microphone submerged in a lagoon underneath the Icelandic glacier Vatnajökull, which allows viewers to listen to the sound of the melting glacier in real time. It is, quite literally, a direct line to global warming in action.

Its sister piece, *Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull*, which takes its name from three other Icelandic glaciers, pursues this interest in technologically mediated ice-melt much further. For this artwork, Paterson recorded the sounds of the three glaciers and pressed them onto phonograph records, made out of ice from the same glacier. The three recordings are played, and

the glacier sounds are heard one final time, as the ice melts and the recorded sound irrecoverably disappears.[5]

The recording technology poignantly interacts with the sound material. To fully appreciate this, we do well to delve a little deeper into some of the fundamentals of media theory. As Sybille Krämer has elucidated, the heart of Friedrich Kittler's influential media theory consists in a cultural technique known as "Time Axis Manipulation" TAM (Krämer 2006). All technological media, down to the most fundamental of them all – writing – enable a form of TAM. Perhaps the most important aspect of Krämer's interpretation is that the act of inscription allows repeated access in a way that unmediated communication, which is subject to the irreversible flow of time, does not. In other words, media spatialize the temporal aspect of communication, and expose it in this way to new forms of manipulation: a written text can be repeated and studied at length (not only in real time); a sound recording can be slowed down (for instance, playing a record at 78rpm instead of 33 1/3rpm on a turntable); or a tape can be played in reverse (remember the fad that 1970s pop songs would somehow spell out subliminal messages when played backwards?) All these are forms in which the flow of time can manipulated.

This idea of time axis manipulation as defined by Krämer, when brought to bear on Paterson, offers a poignant framework for Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull. If the reproducibility that lies at the core of TAM is also at the heart of the (stated or implicit) preservationist goal of environmental glacier sound recordings, then Paterson's performance piece turns this feature on its head.

The no-longer-eternal ice of the glacier here provides not only the sound materials but also the recording materials. The sounds are thus doubly fragile. And in this situation, reproducing a recorded sound on a melting medium is not a repeatable act, but becomes a singular event. In being replayed, the sound, like Eurydice in the Orpheus myth, dies a second death, this time more definitive, with no further hope of being recovered. The tragedy of the ecological catastrophe is captured

in this overdetermined aural death; the recording that melts, in real time, before our ears and eyes, hammers the final nail in the coffin of the glacier's expiration.

Langjökull, Snæfellsjökull, Solheimajökull makes available to the senses the processes of global warming to which we can normally only gain access through our faculty of reason – if at all. The hope to which we typically cling, that we might preserve something, anything, for the future, melts away with the last sounds of the Icelandic glaciers.

Notes

[1] Even the New York Times reported on this phenomenon found in ambient and electronic music. www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/arts/music/melting-ice-music.html (last access Nov 22, 2023).

[2] While there is much to criticize in Schafer – most recently by Robinson, D. (2019). *Hungry Listening,* Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press – in the hands of subsequent ecomusicologists, the study of soundscapes has flourished into an important branch of the field. See for instance, Guyette, M. Q. and Post, J. C. (2014). "Ecomusicology, Ethnomusicology, and Soundscape Ecology," in: A. Allen and K. Dawe (ed.), *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*, New York: Routledge, pp. 40–56.

[3] One might argue that the recent museum protests of the summer 2022 are trying to do exactly that. See Rehdig, A. (2023). "Mit Tütensuppe und Kartoffelbrei," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

[4] Earth-Moon-Earth (Moonlight Sonata Reflected from the Surface of the Moon) (2007), Totality (2016), and Fossil Necklace (2013).

[5] A video recording exists documenting the unique performance.

References

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