

Scorescapes: On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness

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Source: *Leonardo*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2015), pp. 117-123

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43835212>

Accessed: 14-04-2024 20:55 +00:00

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ARTIST'S ARTICLE

Scorescapes

On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness

YOLANDE HARRIS

ABSTRACT

The author discusses *Scorescapes*, an artistic research project that investigates how sound mediates our relationship to the environment and how contemporary multidisciplinary art practices can articulate this. *Scorescapes* joins the author's own artistic practice with a theoretical analysis that highlights how relationships to the environment drawn through sound are profoundly bound up with technology. Key concepts include: making the inaudible audible; underwater sound and cetacean communication; field recordings and the contextual basis of sound; typologies of listening; the score as relationship; and techno-intuition.

SOUND, ENVIRONMENT AND SONIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Scorescapes is an artistic research project that combines theoretical and conceptual development with a set of related artworks described throughout this paper [1]. Through the project I create hybrid methods that aim to heighten personal awareness through direct engagement with sonic environments, negotiating a role for the artist and composer as a researcher. Working closely with composers David Dunn, Alvin Lucier and Pauline Oliveros, and with bio-acoustic scientist Michel André, I tested and applied theoretical ideas. This process generated unexpected insights, including the need to distinguish between audification, sonification and visualization processes, the paucity of research on underwater sonic environments and the anthropocentric bias toward environmental sound.

What does it mean to relate to the environment through sound? Building on both music theory and visual arts, I propose an expanded notion of the musical score—one that facilitates a *relationship* in and between minds, notations and

environments. Building on my prior projects *Taking Soundings* (2006–2007) and *Sun Run Sun* (2008–2009), which examine navigation techniques through sound, *Scorescapes* investigates parallels between acoustic ecology and land art, ecology and systems aesthetics, and the legacy of walking as an art form that emphasizes an embodied relationship to one's environment. Such relationships are often profoundly bound up with technology, which raises questions as to how instruments enable as well as inhibit certain forms of knowledge. *Scorescapes* considers sounds beyond the range of human hearing and in uninhabitable environments and investigates techniques, common assumptions and approaches to making the inaudible audible. Further, my research on the sonic qualities of the underwater environment, where sound is essential to aquatic life, leads to questions of displaced sound in field recordings in general and results in a critique of what I call "sonic colonialism" and my proposal for an embodied engagement with environmental recordings.

My artworks in the *Scorescapes* series both provoke and synthesize these ideas by exploring various forms of presentation, including audiovisual installations and performances, performative lectures, electronic instruments, sonic walks and collaborations with improvising musicians. Through the artistic process of making *Tropical Storm* (2009), *Pink Noise* (2010) (Color Plate A), *Fishing for Sound* (2010) and other works, I recognized the central importance of considering the *context* in which sounds occur rather than focusing exclusively on the qualities of a sound itself. From this perspective, the act of composition emphasizes a renewed focus on listening in order to understand sounds in relationship to their environment and to enable other listeners to do the same.

SCORE: RELATIONAL QUALITIES OF MAPS AND MUSICAL SCORES

A map encodes our relationship to the environment through a set of visual signs that correlate with what we see around us [2]. In parallel, a musical score provides a visual map of sound that can be reproduced in detail. Although usually

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This article is based on Yolande Harris's Ph.D. dissertation, "Scorescapes: On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness," Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University, 2011. The abstract for the thesis received the highest ranking in 2012 by the Leonardo Abstracts Service (LABS). Those interested in submitting abstracts to LABS can find submission forms at <leonardolabs.pomona.edu>.

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considered a definitive static document, a score or map more properly indicates and enables fluid relationships between people, objects and environments. Such an approach reflects current theories that emphasize the relational qualities of sound [3]. Unlike the visual, which tends to privilege discrete objects, sound is energy that fills space; it is defined through the relationships it sets up between sound and listener. Rethinking this relationship between visual depiction and sonic interpretation, whether in musical scores or navigational maps, creates a more open field in which to consider multidisciplinary artworks.

My projects *Taking Soundings* and *Sun Run Sun* investigate sonic navigations through technologies ranging from celestial navigation to GPS systems (Fig. 1), emphasizing our reliance on technological mediation in defining our sense of place and location. In *Taking Soundings* I sonify GPS data and create personal graphic maps through performance of prerecorded and live GPS traces. As part of *Sun Run Sun* I created the *Satellite Sounders* (Fig. 2)—handheld live-GPS-sonification instruments—in order to create a more direct experience for individual participants. As they walk they hear sounds of their environment overlaid with the sonified data from satellites circling in space above them. By creating these instruments, my goal was to emphasize a sense of connectedness between our perceptions, our physical bodies and our environment [4].

To this end, *Scorescapes* investigates how sound forms and defines relationships to our environments. Sound is a form of energy manifested through air, water or solid matter, articulating relationships between events, processes, media and those who hear. By concentrating on sound in the environment and learning how to listen, both with and without technology, one learns sonic relationships between events and ecologies. In order to gain such a perspective it is necessary to listen beyond the human hearing range and beyond accessible areas in environments such as underwater. Such listening requires technological mediation through instruments as well as via processes of audification, sonification and visualization, which further demand skilled interpretation. This scenario suggests that the role of the composer must be transformed to focus on listening to the extended



Fig. 1. Yolande Harris, *Taking Soundings*, 2007; *Navigating by Circles/Sextant*, 2007; and *Sun Run Sun*, 2008–2009. Shown here exhibited in *Tracing Mobility*, House of World Cultures, Berlin (2011) [27]. *Taking Soundings* was developed during an Artistic Fellowship at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne and an Artistic Residency at STEIM, Amsterdam (2006–2007). (© Yolande Harris)



Fig. 2. Yolande Harris, *Sun Run Sun: Satellite Sounders*, 2008. Satellite Sounders are handheld custom-made instruments that allow one to listen to changing satellite data while walking [28]. They consist of a GPS antenna and receiver, a small computer processor converting the data into sound, a rechargeable battery and stereo headphones. I developed *Sun Run Sun* as an artist in residence at the Netherlands Media Art Institute and STEIM, Amsterdam (2007–2008). (© Yolande Harris)

environment and critically interrogating the technologies used to do this in order to interpret those environments through sound.

SCAPE: RETHINKING THE LEGACY OF ART AND ECOLOGY

The legacy of art concerned with ecology and the environment provides a useful theoretical and historical context for this work, and I identify key approaches that continue to be influential. For example, much can be learned from the acoustic ecology and land art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which articulated the complexity of our relationship to spaces outside the gallery and music venue, between here

and there, site and non-site [5,6]. Another theoretical context is systems theory, which offers a foundation for thinking of ecologies as complex systems that achieve homeostasis through interconnected feedback loops. In such a conceptual framework, our presence in an environment is one of an immersed participant rather than an outside observer. As a result, we are made aware of the overwhelming impact of human life on ecological balance [7]. Commenting on the projects of eco-art pioneers Helen and Newton Harrison, critic Jack Burnham has written: "Being drawn into an integral, on-going, natural system gradually alters the artist's attitude towards self and the world" [8].

The artistic exploration of relationships to the environment has a long history, even a prehistory, and important parallels can be drawn between the visionary work of art historian Lucy Lippard on recontextualizing land art and composer David Dunn on recontextualizing Acoustic Ecology. Lippard states that "the re-establishment of a coherent relationship between nature and culture is a critical element in any progressive view of the future" [9], while Dunn claims that the "capacity to hear the soundscape as music is simultaneously one of the most archaic ways of listening and the most modern" [10]. Recent exhibitions on eco-aesthetics build on these historical foundations—for example, the form of walking in art, prominent in both acoustic ecology and land art, continues in current sound walks and locative media projects that directly involve the body and mind in motion [11], offering an experience of direct engagement with the environment.

Combining these ideas about scores and mapping, acoustic ecology, land art and systems theory gives a perspective from which to consider the following research and artworks in the *Scorescapes* project.

INAUDIBLE: SOUNDS BEYOND HUMAN HEARING

The implications of the study of sound, and especially of making the inaudible audible, demand that we rethink our position within other, larger, non-human ecologies [12]. Bio-acoustic research is continuously discovering new hearing and sounding mechanisms in different species and is just beginning to understand their relationship to functioning and sustaining complex ecosystems. Vast swathes of the soundscape lie beyond human perception due to their frequency, amplitude or temporal qualities or their location in uninhabitable or inaccessible environments. Given that gathering, analyzing and disseminating sound beyond our hearing ranges is intimately bound up with technology, to what extent do we question the "ostensible neutrality of these listening technologies" [13], particularly since listening is both personal and contextual [14]? Even when a sound is within our hearing range, whether or not we hear it depends largely on our attentiveness and the mental filters we impose on listening. In this sense, sounds can be inaudible because we do not pay attention to them, and we may need to practice listening techniques in order to actually hear them [15].

Common assumptions and technical approaches to making the inaudible audible are audification, sonification and visualization. I identify and distinguish between two approaches that are often conflated and confused: *audification*, which requires the scaling of existing vibratory signals into the human hearing range, and *sonification*, which consists of translating and mapping a choice of sounds onto data. Audification uses the existing signal as its basis, while sonification requires compositional strategies of mapping data (non-vibratory information) onto sounds. Both techniques require an initial creativity to imagine the presence of sounds one cannot hear and the ability to interpret the sonic environments revealed to our hearing range through these processes [16].

WHALE: AN INVESTIGATION OF UNDERWATER SOUND

Underwater is perhaps the most pertinent example of a sonic environment that is only perceivable to humans with the aid of technology. However, relatively little is known about the sonic qualities of the underwater environment, where sound is essential to aquatic life. Making this inaudible environment audible, given the limitations of human hearing described above, demands technical, imaginative and interpretative approaches to sound. Transdisciplinary approaches that treat sound as sonic evidence would suggest a shifted role for the composer and sonic ecologist [17].

A considerable amount of research on underwater sound has involved the study of whales. My analysis joins three seminal works on whale sound: Payne and McVay's "Songs of Humpback Whales" [18], André and Kamminga's "Rhythmic Dimension in the Echolocation of Click Trains of Sperm Whales" [19] and Alvin Lucier's *Quasimodo: The Great Lover* [20]. Through a critical comparison of the scientists' use of musical ideas of song and rhythm with the composer's interest in processes of sound transmission over long distances, the necessity of exploring the contextual nature of sound in the environment becomes apparent. Further, Lucier's *Quasimodo*, inspired by the humpback whale's ability to send sound over vast distances, engages with the discussion of long-distance sound and communication. Other radical research, such as the analysis of dolphin sound by scientist John Lilly [21], explores interspecies communication through sound and has inspired more recent attempts to "communicate" with whales through music [22].

All of this research points toward complex issues of noise pollution and the mitigation of anthropogenic sound in the ocean. The vast role of sound in underwater life in general must be recognized as a crucial area of research and development in a move toward a sustainable environmental future, in which collaboration across disciplines can play a central role. To this end I propose the physiological experience of underwater sound in order to understand the sonic contexts of remote environments, exemplified by my artworks, including the installation *Pink Noise* and the performance *Fishing for Sound*. *Pink Noise* challenges preconceptions about underwater sound by juxtaposing an idyllic video of the surface with the overwhelming, yet often strangely beautiful,

anthropogenic noise underneath. By involving the audience in an otherwise alien, inaccessible environment, the installation aims to establish a more empathetic relationship to the underwater world through the immersive experience of the artwork (Color Plate A).



Fig. 3. Yolande Harris, *Tropical Storm*, installation of single-channel video (room-sized projection) and stereo sound (dispersed), 2009, shown here exhibited at CAGE100: *Opening Spaces for Action*, Contemporary Art Museum Leipzig (2012) [29]. Sound and video recordings of a tropical storm evoke the multisensory experience of being immersed in a torrential downpour in a rainforest. *Tropical Storm* presents the intensity of noise and energy through minimal editing, allowing the exact synchronization of sound and image to work up an affective space of palpable intensity that can be both overwhelming and meditative. (© Yolande Harris)



Fig. 4. Yolande Harris, *S.W.A.M.P. (Some Wayward Attempts at Monitoring Prawns)*, sound performance exploring field recordings and acoustic improvisation, 45 minutes, 2009–2011 (in collaboration with Christopher Williams) [30]. Shown here being performed at *Sonic Unconscious*, Issue Project Room, New York (2011). (© Yolande Harris)

FIELD: PRESENTNESS IN DISPLACED SOUND

Making the inaudible audible, investigating underwater sound and most other areas of listening to the environment rely in some way on the practice of field recording, for reasons ranging from documentation, preservation and analysis of soundscapes to gathering musical material [23]. It is therefore important to reconsider the role of field recording in establishing relationships to place through listening. The deceptively simple process of recording sounds from a chosen environment and replaying them at another time and place is laden with assumptions about context and portability [24]. Any decontextualization of a soundscape from its environment forces us to listen as an outsider, inevitably biasing our understanding. At its worst, this can lead to what I call “sonic colonialism,” based on a pseudo-understanding of a distant location. To avoid such an extreme, we need to consider our relationship to the recorded sounds: the context in which they originate, the place in which we hear them and how our experience is mediated by technology. This also applies to environments that we cannot physically access, such as underwater, the inside of the body or other extremes of physical and temporal scales.

Given the displaced nature of sound in a field recording, how can a sense of presentness—an acute awareness of embodied location—be achieved in such displaced soundscapes? In my work, the listener is the spatio-temporal locus of a perceptual event, and I emphasize how techniques of listening can potentially invigorate the use of field recording in sound art. *Tropical Storm* (2009) (Fig. 3), *S.W.A.M.P.* (2009–2011) (Fig. 4), *You Me Swim Blackbird* (2012) and *Displaced Sound Walks* (2010–2014) approach displaced sound through different means: as a visual arts exhibition, a musical performance, an Internet sound exhibition and a sound walk workshop, respectively. These projects demonstrate a variety of strategies available for exploring these ideas. For example, the video and sound installation *Tropical Storm* creates the experience of a room full of rain. It is loud, immersive and always present in the here and now. By internalizing the environment of a storm, the installation comments on

current practices of field recording and displaced sounds. As a complement to the installation, the *Displaced Sound Walks* further the process of hyper-aware listening while walking. Through a collaborative, workshop-like creative process, ambient sounds recorded using binaural microphones by participants on their chosen walking routes are later played back on headphones while the participants retrace the same paths. The temporally displaced sound has the effect of “making the participant extremely aware of the functioning of their body when feeling and perceiving reality” [25].

FLARE: TECHNO-INTUITION AND SONIC CONSCIOUSNESS

After experiencing an explosion while performing with my work *Sun Run Sun: Satellite Sounders*, I used the idea of a flare to explore the impact of my instruments and sound technologies on ways of listening and understanding environmental context. A flare—a light signal used to indicate distress at sea—embodies explosion, energy, light, sonic vibration and communication within an environment, qualities that are central to the artworks in the *Scorescapes* series. Inspired by my psychological transformation brought on by the power of a technological explosion, I rethought my project and developed my concept of “techno-intuition.” Foregrounding a conscious balance between technological and intuitive forms of practice, techno-intuition aims to develop attentive, embodied interactions with the environment through sound [26].

Techno-intuition draws together further diverse strands of thought in my artistic practice that concentrate on sonic consciousness. *Therapy for Future Flooding* (2010), *Swim* (2010) (Fig. 5) and *Fishing for Sound* join together sound therapy, dream work and PTSD treatment methods. *Pink Noise* and *Tropical Storm* combine sound and image to en-

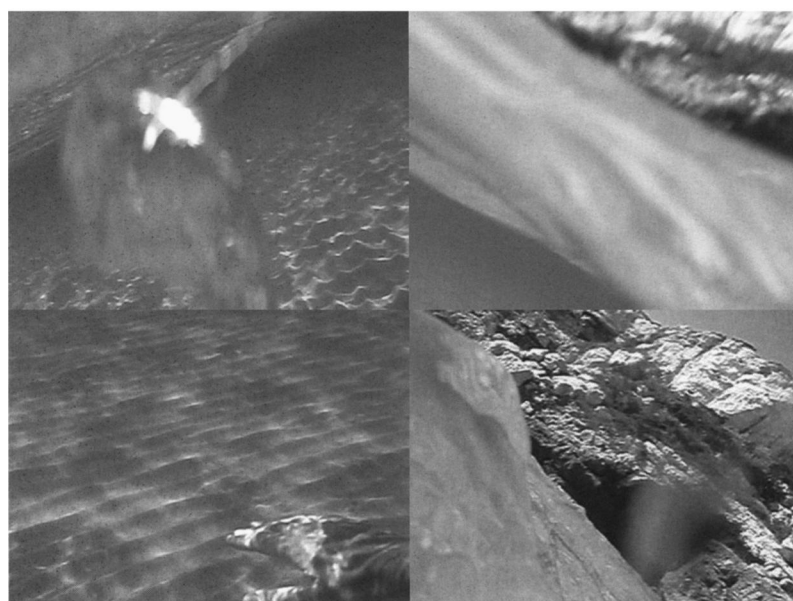


Fig. 5. Yolande Harris, *Swim*, composite image of four frames from single channel video and sound, 3-minute loop, 2010 [31]. Recorded from an ocean swimmer's viewpoint, *Swim* captures the rhythm of breathing and physical motion as the sound and image alternate between above and below water, cutting through the surface, exploring the physicality of sound through a direct involvement with the environment. (© Yolande Harris)

hance perceptual awareness of technology and its mediation of the environment. Through the artistic process of making these works I recognized the central importance of considering the *context* in which sounds occur rather than focusing exclusively on the qualities of a sound itself. From this perspective, I conclude that the act of composition emphasizes a renewed focus on listening in order to understand sounds in relationship to their environment, enabling other listeners to do the same.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Scorescapes* artistic research project maps historical approaches and suggests potential trajectories for understanding the role of sound in ongoing transformations of the environment through human intervention. A greater awareness of the interrelation of sound, technology, the environment and sonic consciousness could lead toward more sustainable practices in the arts, sciences and other fields.

Acknowledgments

The *Scorescapes* artworks were developed with funds from the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB). The doctoral dissertation was developed in the DocArtes program at Leiden University and the Orpheus Institute Ghent. I would like to thank the many individuals whose support made this research possible, in particular my supervisors Frans de Ruiter, David Dunn and Bob Gilmore.

References and Notes

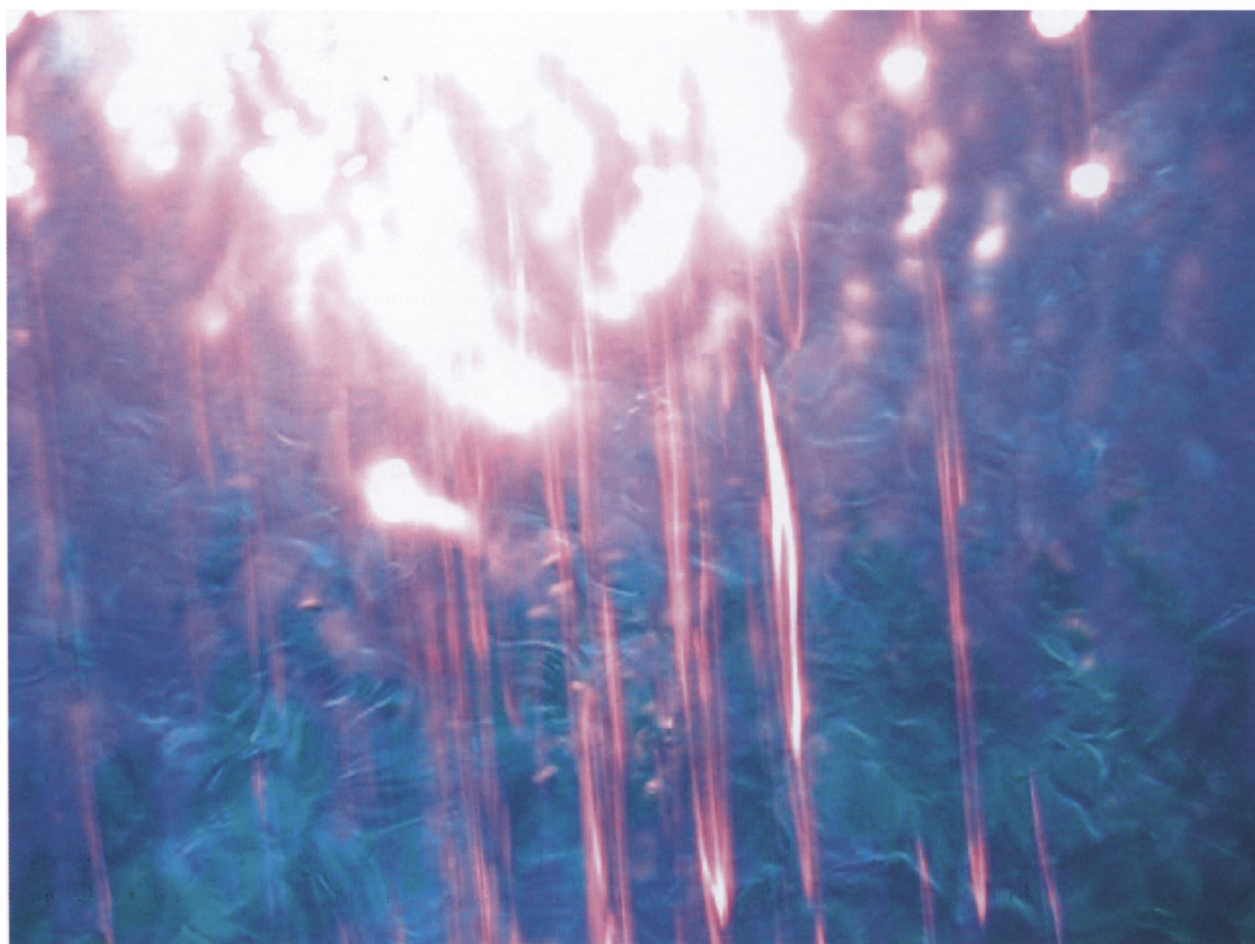
Unedited references and notes as provided by the author.

- 1 This paper provides a summary of my Ph.D. dissertation: “*Scorescapes: On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness*,” Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University (2011): <<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/18184>>.
- 2 Elaborated in Yolande Harris, “Score as Relationship: From Scores, to Score Spaces to Scorescapes,” in *Sound and Score* (Leuven University Press, 2013).
- 3 For an example, see Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (London, U.K.: Continuum, 2007).
- 4 Yolande Harris and Annet Dekker, “Aiming for Dead Reckoning: A Conversation between Yolande Harris and Annet Dekker,” in Cathy Brickwood and Annet Dekker (eds.), *Navigating E-Culture* (Amsterdam, NL: Virtueel Platform, 2009) pp. 41–52.
- 5 See R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (1977). Republished as *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1993).
- 6 See Marje Bijvoet, *Art as Inquiry: Toward New Collaborations Between Art, Science and Technology* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1997).

- 7 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, NY: Balantine Books, 1972).
- 8 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1968) p. 256.
- 9 Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1983) p. 12.
- 10 David Dunn, "Acoustic Ecology and the Experimental Music Tradition," (American Music Center, New Music Box, 2008): <www.newmusicbox.org/article.nmbx?id=5399>.
- 11 See Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York, NY: Verso, 2001).
- 12 The topics in this section are expanded upon in Yolande Harris, "Making the Inaudible Audible: Strategies and Disagreements," *Proceedings of the 16th International Symposium for Electronic Arts, ISEA 2010*, Ruhr (Berlin, DE: Revolver, 2010) pp. 133–135.
- 13 Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) p. 200.
- 14 LaBelle [3].
- 15 Examples of composers who developed a pedagogy for such listening techniques are: R. Murray Schafer "Ear Cleaning: Notes for an Experimental Music Course" (1967, BML Canada); Pauline Oliveros "Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice" (IUniverse, 2005).
- 16 I describe this in more detail in Yolande Harris, "Making the Inaudible Audible: Strategies and Disagreements," *Proceedings of the International Symposium of Electronic Arts (ISEA Ruhr 2010, Dortmund)*.
- 17 The detailed article that expands upon the topics discussed in this section is published as Yolande Harris, "Understanding Underwater: The Art and Science of Interpreting Whale Sounds," *Interference: A Journal of Audio Culture*, Vol. 2 (2012): <www.interferencejournal.com/articles/a-sonic-geography/understanding-underwater>.
- 18 Roger Payne and Scott McVay, "Songs of Humpback Whales," *Science*, Vol. 173, No. 3997, pp. 585–597 (1971).
- 19 Michel André and Cees Kamminga, "Rhythmic Dimension in the Echolocation Click Trains of Sperm Whales: A Possible Function of Identification and Communication," *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the UK*, Vol. 80, pp. 163–169 (2000).
- 20 The score of *Quasimodo: The Great Lover* (1970) can be found in Alvin Lucier, *Reflections / Reflexionen* (Cologne, DE: MuzikTexte, 1995).
- 21 John Lilly, *Man and Dolphin* (London, UK: Victor Gollancz, 1962).
- 22 For an example, see David Rothenberg, "Whale Music: Anatomy of an Interspecies Duet," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 18, pp. 47–53 (2008).
- 23 For more detail on the topics discussed in this section, see Yolande Harris, "Presentness in Displaced Sound," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 23, pp. 13–14 (2013).
- 24 The theory and practice of sound artists and acoustic ecologists since the 1970s, such as Schafer, Westerkamp, Lockwood, Oliveros, Dunn and LaBelle, and echoed in visual art, e.g. Smithson's concept of "Site/Nonsite," provide a rich variety of approaches to this topic.
- 25 Reviewed in M. Colpani, "New Media Shaping of Perception of Space and Perception of the Body," MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2010: <<http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/mcolpani-5812682-master-thesis.pdf>>.
- 26 For a more developed account of the concept of techno-intuition see Yolande Harris, "Techno-Intuition: Experiments with Sound in the Environment," in *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology*, (Leuven University Press, 2014).
- 27 *Taking Soundings* (2007) has previously been exhibited in *Possibility of Action: The Life of the Score*, MACBA, Barcelona (2008) and *Ground Level*, Hayward Touring UK, (2010–2011). *Navigating by Circles/Sextant* (2007) was exhibited at Center for Contemporary Non-Objective Art Brussels (2007), in *Eco-Aesthetics*, TAG Den Haag (2008), and in *Ground Level* (above). For list of exhibitions of *Sun Run Sun* see <www.yolandeharris.net>.
- 28 *Sun Run Sun: Satellite Sounders* (2008) was developed while I was Artist in Residence at Netherlands Institute for Media Arts in collaboration with STEIM, Amsterdam. This image was exhibited at *Playing the City*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2009). For list of exhibitions of *Sun Run Sun* see <www.yolandeharris.net>.
- 29 *Tropical Storm* (2009) has also been exhibited at *Alvin Lucier Residency*, Atlantic Center for the Arts, Florida (2009), and *Sonic Unconscious*, Issue Project Room, New York (2011).
- 30 *S.W.A.M.P.* (2009–2011) has also been performed at Diapason Gallery, New York (2009), and Galerie Mario Mazolli, Berlin (2010).
- 31 *Swim* (2010) has been exhibited at Ear to the Earth Festival: "Water and the World", New York (2010), and in *Dump Time*, Shedhalle, Zurich (2011).

Manuscript received 31 May 2013.

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COLOR PLATE A: **SCORESCAPES**

Yolande Harris, *Pink Noise*, installation, single channel video (floor projection), stereo sound (headphones), 2010 (video still). (© Yolande Harris) *Pink Noise* juxtaposes anthropogenic sound, recorded underwater at a national marine reserve in peak tourist season, with a video of colorful light reflecting on the sea from the same location. Headphones are suspended from the ceiling directly above the video projection on the floor, physically emphasizing the technological mediation required to make audible the inaudible underwater sounds. This work was exhibited in *Esemplasticism*, Club Transmediale, Berlin (2010); *Sonic Unconscious*, Issue Project Room, New York (2011); *Alternative Now* WRO Media Art Biennale, Wroclaw, Poland (2011); and MADATAC Media Art Festival, Madrid (2013).