Editorial Introduction: Circuits of Art and Communication in the Twenty-First Century

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Recommended Citation
Retrieved from https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol6/iss1/4

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Introduction: Circuits of Art and Communication in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: A founding editor of Sound Scripts, Jonathan W. Marshall, introduces the essays that follow in volume six of the journal, taking the reader through a tour of informatic exchanges, truths and falsehoods.

In the 1995 documentary entitled Predictions of Fire which deals with the Slovenian industrial band Laibach, Slavoj Žižek outlines what he calls “over-identification.”¹ According to Žižek, contemporary fascism is a kind of lie or fiction, because fascists cover up their brutal, violent and hateful ideology with a pretence of rational argument and humanist compassion for the people whom they claim to protect. At the time that the documentary was made, no one took the infiltration of fascism and anti-democratic organisations into Europe very seriously. It seemed obvious at the time that fascists were playing a game of subterfuge. They publicly promoted a rational policy of national unity and public engagement, while privately nurturing anti-democratic, violent principles. According to Laibach and Žižek, the only answer to this state of affairs was to take fascism and totalitarianism more seriously—or more honestly and truthfully—than the enemies of democracy themselves did. By actively embodying and overtly performing the otherwise disavowed elements of fascism, the band Laibach hoped to open up a space to critique fascism and its ongoing presence within democratic institutions. In short, Laibach represented fascism more accurately than either the fascists, or the lacklustre, often corrupt, so-called “democratic” politicians of their own age. The documentary Predictions of Fire closes with a quotation from the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz: “Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision. Then burn down the building to fulfil the prediction.”² Laibach do not denounce fascism as a falsehood, nor do they denounce fascists as liars. Suspended somewhere between irony and an active support of their enemies, Laibach aim to pre-emptively predict the death of European democracy precisely so that they might kill both so-called “democracy” and its fascist enemies, and start anew. Only through such a purgative strategy of double-negatives might a true democracy emerge. This is their “prediction of fire.”

Volume six of the Sound Scripts represents a significant milestone for the journal. Sound Scripts was founded in 2006 by Cat Hope and myself, Jonathan W. Marshall, to provide selected presenters from the Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference with the opportunity to rework their earlier oral presentations into full length, peer-reviewed articles. The early editions of Sound Scripts were distributed through personal and scholarly networks, library donations, and after 2009, via the auspices of the national Australian Music Centre (https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/). The journal quickly developed an international readership, spreading from Australia to New Zealand, Europe and America. Accessing articles nevertheless remained difficult for many readers. With volume six however Sound Scripts is published online as an open access journal. The previous volumes are also being digitised, and
we hope to have the full Sound Script archive available online before the start of 2020 (see https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/, ISSN 2209-1475).

As Helen Rusak explains in her article within this volume:

The consequence of the culture of [digitisation.] multimedia and real-virtuality is that they capture the utter diversity of most cultural expressions and put an end to separation and classification of different cultural fields, categorisations and genres. This has consequences for music distribution, Rusak outlining how Elena Kats-Chernin’s score for the ballet Wild Swans initially languished on store shelves before the piece was reworked for an international banking advertisement and subsequently entered the digital, online economy, showing up on the dance charts before moving onto the “YouTube remix vlogosphere.” While it is unlikely that Sound Scripts will experience quite such an explosive rise in distribution, the online journal now functions in a similar manner, serving as an interdisciplinary platform or community wherein diverse artist-driven practices might interact and cross-pollinate. These developments in informatic exchange present rich new opportunities for artists, scholars and audiences, but also challenges.

In 2016, many commentators claimed that society had entered an era after truth, in which clear agreement on basic factual concepts or forms of verification had collapsed. The underlying paradox of this situation is that while the “post truth” world is critiqued and attacked on all sides, no one actually advocates the abandoning of truth and associated principals of verification. Commentators on all sides, US President Donald Trump included, claim to be defenders of truth. It is always the opponents of the speaker who apparently deny fundamental truths. Trump lashes out at “fake news,” and, at least in his own telling, it is never Trump who is to blame for perpetuating untruths. What this reveals is that the criteria upon which something might be judged true or false are specific to any given community. Truth is transactional, not absolute, emerging out of the act of communication itself. Indeed, truth and authenticity can only emerge out of a dialectic confrontation with falsehood and inauthenticity.

The authors collected in volume six of Sound Scripts address in different ways such issues of communicative exchange and the distribution of power. In his study of the New Zealand underground band The Stones, Darren Jorgenson argues that within a world so full rock, punk and garage bands, the only way to produce something genuinely “truthful” or innovative is to adopt a stance of irony and indifference—to mock that which one so skilfully reproduces. Through a semi-satirical “mimicry of rock,” New Zealand’s The Stones “also produced great rock music, their nonchalance achieving the quality of authentic expression that defines the rock attitude itself.” The Stones might be seen, in this sense, as over-identifying with The Rolling Stones to such a degree that they achieve rock’n’roll greatness in their own right, potentially displacing their mirror selves. The US New Music pioneer Anne LeBaron makes a similar point about her early collaborations as part of the Midwestern art movement, Raudelunas. At the level of musical complexity and sonic density, Pierre Boulez’s serialist masterpiece Structures Ia for Two Pianos (1952) is comparable to the recording Dinosaur Time (1980) by Raudelunas’ artists Nolan Hatcher and Craig Nutt. In Boulez’s words, the artists performing both works have purged “every trace of the conventional, whether it concerned figures and phrases, or development and form” such that, as LeBaron puts it, the structural rules governing both pieces seem all but “random.” By accepting this blurring of classifications, or, as LeBaron would have it, by “cavorting along the truthiness bridge,” she and her colleagues kept their “creative spirits … intact as we engaged with one another in a self-created and unstructured environment of our own making.” Tinkering with truth,
authenticity and playful communication, Raudelunas and New Zealand’s underground bands create their own joyous communities of practice and exchange.

Some truths are particularly hard to approach because they exceed the capacities of human comprehension. Timothy Morton has proposed the term “hyperobject” to refer to an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it is conceptually impossible for humans to fully encompass their nature. Hyperobjects are “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” such that it is impossible to hold within one’s consciousness every single instance of them at the same time.8 These are “genuine nonhuman objects that are not simply the products of a human gaze” and which have the potential to act on humans and human systems, sometimes with catastrophic results. One may model a hyperobject in abstract or computational terms, but their total phenomenal presence is, by definition, beyond the capacities of the human. The earth’s climatic systems and the chaotic interactions of human-induced climate change are amongst some of the most important hyperobjects with which we must now engage. Morton stresses the uncanny “weirdness,” “monstrosity,” and “strange strangeness” of the natural world when considered in these terms.9 Cissi Tsang argues in her contribution to Sound Scripts that in order to more fully engage with the presence and consequences of such environmental systems, one strategy is to subject biological information to computational translation which produces audiovisual patterns and extended durations which represent the extended times and effects of global change and depletion.10 Digital poetics of this kind may help us come to terms with, experience, and communicate, some of these vital truths.

Many of the authors in Sound Scripts echo LeBaron and Tsang by extolling abstract, poetic, mystical or uncanny forms of sonic organisation as a way to discover new truths and to extend listening and compositional possibilities. Erik Griswold for example reworks the egotistical, aggressively masculine art of Jackson Pollock as a way to paint scores which demand creative reinterpretation and collaboration with the players.11 Griswold’s drip scores are expressive and gestural in their own right, but they do not closely dictate how the musician should interpret them. The looping lines and physical lyricism of the scores must be picked up and authored through the body of the individual player. One of Griswold’s scores is included in this journal so that performers may discover for themselves what truths may or may not be prompted by these marks.12 Ben Carey offers a related model of musical collaboration, arguing that his work developing interactive performance systems for use by live instrumental performers is itself a form of shared musical composition, requiring engagement and exchange between designer and player for the best outcome. Whatever truths emerge here, they are shared truths. These models of open-ended, shared composition reach their epiphany in the score by Sage Harlow and published in this edition, entitled Silences.13 Here the performer is invited to create, or meditate, upon silences of different kinds. It is the most gentle of truths, the lightest of statements, a communication which emerges out of the interstices between things and their soundings.

Hannah Reardon-Smith also seeks to cultivate free interpretation and new combinations by suggesting players should “forget” or transcend the canon of music, and all of the limitations which a canonical approach might take, whilst nevertheless still bringing forth “uncanny” echoes of the canonical.14 Reardon-Smith’s is a deliberately contradictory or dialectical model, in which instruments are brought together and sonic affiliations between each are forged, even as conventional filiations of instrumental families are rejected. Instead of musical “families,” such as strings or wind instruments, Reardon-Smith champions musical “oddkin,” to borrow the phrasing of Donna Harraway, using this as an organisational principal for novel
combinations of instruments within improvising ensembles. Louise Devenish and Stuart James bring together their own musical “oddkin,” namely gamelan gongs and electroacoustic sounds, by harnessing pitch and texture to blend and harmonise musical sources.\textsuperscript{15}

Where Reardon-Smith allies her “oddkin” community of musical practice and truths to queer politics, Nicole Carroll suggests a mystical affiliation of materials and signals. Drawing on the esoteric concepts underlying the work of William Butler Yeats, Surrealist artists and others, Carroll produce droning, electronic noise music the sources of which may or may not come from objectively “real” phenomena (alchemical associations, Moon phase data, and more), creating a complex affective web within otherwise semi-randomised musical outputs.\textsuperscript{16}

In my own essay which surveys the concerts featured in the 2017 Totally Huge New Music Festival, I argue that two main trends emerged across the program.\textsuperscript{17} On the one hand, audiences were offered highly phenomenal experiences which functioned principally by physically immersing audiences within a series of sublime, all-encompassing sonic events (represented by the performances of \textit{DCC: Glitch} and Michael Pisaro’s \textit{A Wave and Wave}). Such works communicate their values and effects primarily through a sensorial stimulation which moves across the body. This might be contrasted with a more reflective engagement which harnesses emotional triggers, ranging from comedic humour and game-playing (as epitomised in the neo-Dadaist tendencies of Raudelunas and LeBaron’s “Concerto For Active Frogs”) or outrage and discomfort (LeBaron’s disturbing allusion to US military policy in “I’m an American and My Nation Will Not Reward You”). Where \textit{A Wave and Waves} and \textit{DCC: Glitch} tend place viewers within an englobulating corporeal experience, LeBaron worked to activate playful reflection through humour and pleasure, as well anger and disquiet.

Morton’s model of the hyperobjects is challenging not only in epistemological terms, but also ontological ones. The first challenge the hyperobject presents is in how do we approach it. Its “truth,” if that is the right word, can only be formulated through abstract mathematical modelling according to scales which radically exceed anything which can be held within the mind (millions of years; millions of kilometres). If such objects are unimaginable, on some level, the question necessarily arises whether they are “real,” according to normal definitions of truth and falsehood. The hyperobject is more of a heuristic to enable humans to at least partially conceptualise that which radically exceeds the human, rather than a knowable, material object in a normal sense. The hyperobject is therefore fantasmatic and irreal to the same degree that it is a demonstrable, physical phenomenon. Hyperobjects demonstrate, in short, that abstract irreal principles can have concrete material consequences. The kind of contradictory double-think which this situation produces has parallels in Cecilia Sun’s discussion of political musicals in the post-truth era.\textsuperscript{18} Lin-Manuel Miranda’s \textit{Hamilton} (2015) and Mohammed Fairouz’s \textit{The New Prince} (2017) mix diverse musical styles and historically inconsistent characters and time periods to depict a world of corruption and conflict which, for all their fantasmatic excess, were widely accepted by audiences as an accurate comment on the contemporary political situation in the wake of Brexit and Trump. When illogic and madness rule the world, only a mad, careening aesthetic can even come close to truthful reflection. Michael Terren identifies a similar strategy of double negation or contradiction in the use of fake orchestral samples and synthesised sounds within contemporary composition.\textsuperscript{19} The unconvincing insubstantiality of such sampled materials produces a weirdly uncanny and tragic feel consistent with our currently mediated, and post-industrial lives. Here the sample itself might be construed as over-identifying with a moribund orchestral logic, wherein the heightened precarity of artistic labour emerges out of so-called vaporwave aesthetics.
Predicting the strategies that would come to eclipse the political discourse of our own times today, Milosz suggested that the powerbrokers of the future would:

- Grow your tree of falsehood from a single grain of truth.
- Do not follow those who lie in contempt of reality.
- Let your lie be even more logical than the truth itself.
- So the weary travellers may find repose in the lie.\(^{20}\)

At risk of being lulled to sleep by the increasing indeterminacy of truth and falsehood, strategies of critical reflection, agitation and gentle resistance become ever more crucial. Moving beyond over-identification, the forces of music and the englobulating, poetical and satirical truths which it can enunciate, might yet save us. Only by harnessing such forces anew might we avoid what Milosz characterised as an environmentally apocalyptic “era of unchained fire.”

**Endnotes**

All URLs accessed March 2018.

20. Milosz, “Child of Europe.”