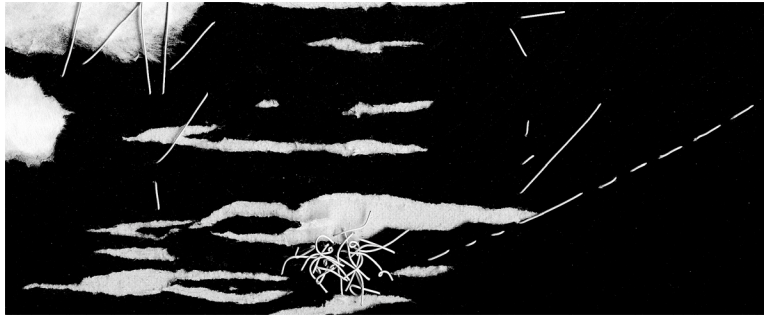# SEIZING A SOUND AND SMELLING ITS BELLY
TO FIT IT IN A FOLDER

Laetitia Sonami for Arcana III – November 2007

I collect sounds. I don't record them as often as I used to, but I now collect them in my mind, where they become placeholders for hazy landscapes. As I write this, I hear some crows in the night, and now they've gone in some crow place in my head, alongside babies and doors. With them come the sounds of the sleeping city around them, the sounds that cannot be seized, shadows of opposite luminescence.
I have been wondering how people think about sounds, but more precisely how they classify and categorize them. This obsession may find its source in my French genes. Though, I have to admit I never read Schaeffer's *Traité des Objets Musicaux*, I like the idea of a catalog of descriptions: organized drawers of essentials and accessories to be used in different settings. I have often felt if I only knew how to hear a *sound*, if I could just measure its trails and know where the well's bottom stand, if I could just stop one sound for a second- long enough to grasp it and weigh it, feel its belly and smell it, I could make sense of where I am.

So,... Categories: why, do you say? Well, like many, I am tethered to sounds caged in laptops, I need to store them in overcrowded memory spaces and recall them on the fly with the gestures of a hand and release them in some odd formations. I need to know where to find them and which recipes to apply. There is not much time for existential pondering when you are trying to make the dance look effortless. On good days, I might rely on some smart algorithmic process where sounds will be an after thought, but if I wait long enough, even that hardly won exercise disappears in the maker's next OS iteration.

After 30 years of aimless wandering, I came up with a way of categorizing sounds. I think of them as *distances* – mainly distances from me but also distances from each other; geographical distance, or psychological distance, or distance on an imaginary line which stretches from iconic realism to abstraction. For example, the sound of a dog panting is close, the time it takes to understand IT IS a dog is very fast, hence a short distance. It is

iconic, it is inscribed. There is probably a dog in my mental continuum and inside dog and outside dog are finally meeting.

Speech and vocal sounds can be mapped to all kinds of scales and territories.   Voices over PA systems are a current attraction – they are usually unintelligible, yet appear close from a point of view of authority – people who know how you should stand, walk, bet and die, barking orders, expecting you to execute commands. But these voices are actually pretty far: you are never addressed singularly, you can extract yourself. The rodeo PA's, the Japanese politician PA's, the police PA's : they all speak in the void. These sounds carry the air with them, and they drift, never reaching destination unless followed by the more iconic explosions of guns. Guns reduce distances very quickly, their bullets ripping through folders, spilling contents, obliterating the need for categories...

One more example… rivers, let's say brooks. They can be right in your ears, but then you carve out some partials, mix some reverse molecules, may be smooth out the bottom end and they drift away like ruffles. Suddenly, open fields appear waiting to be populated. You can leave them as is, and thus exaggerate the vastness of the emptiness that lies in front of you, or you can place paths and objects, indicating points of references and angles of perspective.

Loud sounds are usually very far, quiet sounds are very close and if they are quiet enough, you may hear the furthest of sounds and space then collapses onto itself. And here comes the urge to constantly juggle distances by shifting sounds like a card trickster in the hope that it is the listener who will move freely between imaginary anchors.

I have not yet figured out actual measuring systems, whether I should use the metric or British imperial system. Should I adhere to the Western American landscape with folders dedicated to the horizon? Or to the European landscape with neatly parsed folders?

There could be the 0.1mm sound folder, up to the ∞ one, and all folders in between. For now I only have:

- the VERY, VERY CLOSE folder
- the SOMEWHAT CLOSE folder
- the PRETTY CLOSE
- the NOT SO FAR
- FAR
- SO, SO FAR
- etc…

You get it. The problem is that distances always shift: what is far today may be further tomorrow. So you just hope that you and your folders shift together, spinning somewhat in the same orbits, and if you do collide, that unknown sets of baby folders will spring out on their own.

I haven't even started thinking about folders for spaces *between* sounds, for spaces that lie *behind* sounds and which exist where no sounds exist. I probably need a new operating system…