

A SOUND
BARRIER

TESTING GROUNDS

The traffic noise here is more or less constant. The site is in the centre of the city, where peak hour lasts all day. The noise is not altogether uniform - there are discernible, wave-like patterns in the volume. This variation could perhaps be explained by the surrounding traffic-light cycles, which compress and release the vehicular flow, creating intersecting formations that sometimes amplify and other times obliterate each other. Still, the frequency of these waves causes an overall effect of constant, unchanging noise - a dusty and supernaturally turbulent ocean beach.

When I take the traffic sounds as my point of focus, I begin to feel as though time has stopped. The consistency of the wave across the day dampens the feeling of time's motion. Time has frozen, yet the traffic keeps inexplicably passing. I know, intellectually, that I am hearing an effect of constant change, but I feel, bodily, the solidness, the dependability - the soundness - of the sound.

I feel the soundness of the sound, but I feel it via an unsoundness of my body. I notice a turbulence in my chest and gut, an agitated rolling and juddering across my skin. I suddenly feel a desire to lie on the ground or prop myself up against a wall. I'm looking for a sounder body to lean on, to brace myself against the intangible body of the noise.

WHALES

Whales can see barely 20 metres ahead in the water, but can hear a wave crashing on the shore from thousands of kilometres away. They use their voices to communicate, and they use their finely developed echolocation abilities to find prey and to understand the contours of their environment. Where a human's consciousness and sense of self relies heavily on visual information, a whale's is based primarily on sound.

The oceans have become much noisier over the last century. Busy shipping routes and underwater gas exploration have contributed to what marine scientist Christopher Clark calls

"acoustical bleaching" - an intense blanket of noise that drowns out the whales' voices, preventing them from feeding and communicating.

Whales have been observed hiding behind rocks and moving dangerously close to the shore in an attempt to escape the noise of underwater explosions. Whales living in noisy parts of the ocean are thought to be suffering from chronic noise-induced stress.

WAVES

At Testing Grounds, I feel awash in noise. I had planned to spend most days working here over the residency, but in the end I found I spent most days hiding from the site.

I had noticed the ocean of noise on my first visit, and realised that I would be unable to ignore it or to easily focus on anything else while I was there. Most people I meet appear to have the ability to filter out unnecessary aural information. This is an ability I have never been able to share or to fully comprehend.

I decided that if I could not ignore the noise, I would make it the focus of my work at Testing Grounds. This tactic had worked for me in the past, ameliorating my stress by narrowing my focus.

Yet, despite my best efforts and my lifetime of finely-honed coping strategies, I felt as if I was drowning. I fled home, and I dreaded having to return the next day. The site is as impossible and inaccessible to me as if it were situated on the bottom of the ocean floor.

SOUND BARRIER

Humans, like whales, experience psychological ill-effects from noise pollution. Noise-induced sleep disturbance can contribute to high blood pressure and mood problems. Noise can impair concentration and increase irritability, having negative effects on people's interpersonal abilities.

Noises from traffic, aircraft and industry typically come to people's attention only when they are loud

enough to cause a disturbance. These noises are perceived as inherently bad, meaningless, or unproductive. They are an unfortunate by-product that spills out of an otherwise useful device or activity, an excess that we can accept insofar as we can ignore it in favour of more meaningful aural activities.

This is no surprise. These sounds are unpleasant, cacophonous, and unstructured. They have no meaning aside from their undifferentiated excess. They are difficult and worrisome and pointless. They are the offcuts and refuse of something more desirable. It's hard to love trash.

It's hard to love trash, but I think trash is still worthy of remark, for no reason other than that it exists. I think it's worth acting as if the noise is meaningful, even when there is no meaning to be discerned. The noise is audible, and that is more than enough.

I have transcribed the sounds I heard while I was in residence at Testing Grounds, and listed them here in alphabetical order.

REFERENCES

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