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Christopher DeLaurenti

College of William and Mary, cadelaurenti@wm.edu

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On Phonography: A Response to Michael Rüsenberg

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Christopher DeLaurenti

In his review of my *N30: Live at the WTO Protest, November 30, 1999*, [*Soundscape* Fall/Winter 2004, vol. 5 no. 2, page 48], Michael Rüsenberg asserts that I made *N30* “...without the intervening instance of any production of art, even to the extent of selection and framing. And as Frank Zappa says, ‘The most important thing in art is the frame’”

Zappa notwithstanding, Rüsenberg missed that I framed sections of *N30* with the following silences: 7 seconds at 06” and 3’26”; 4 seconds at 9’20”; 2 seconds at 9’36” and 9’45”; 7 seconds at 49’31”; 13 seconds at 50’33”; 3 seconds at 52’02”; and 4 seconds at 59’25” (the piece concludes at 61’28”). Now if Rüsenberg felt that the work’s continuous 40 minute segment from 9’47” to 49’31” was too long or bloated, he should have stated so, explaining why there wasn’t any “production of art.”

Regarding his accompanying complaint of “selection,” Rüsenberg flunks CD Reviewing 101 by failing to describe *N30* except for the glib “...walkie-talkie type messages by security forces observing the WTO Protest in Seattle...” Rüsenberg omits the protester chants, crushing mobs, the close-up crunch of batons and rubber bullets hitting bodies (including my own), hissing tear gas, the fearlessly funky machine-gun drumming of the Infernal Noise Brigade, and much more.

On the following page, Rüsenberg’s subsequent review admits a similar confusion regarding the nature and intent of another CD, the marvelous *Buildings (New York)* by Francisco López. Yet López, who collaborated with Rüsenberg on the excellent 1998 album *Roma: A Soundscape Remix*, enjoyed the chance to answer the reviewer’s questions. Despite my publicly available email address, I did not. I will do so now. Rüsenberg bemoans that “[a]s little noticeable effort has been put into what, among my soundscape colleagues is known as ‘recording quality,’ DeLaurenti inadvertently questions my beliefs on soundscape work, documentation and composition alike.”

N30 directly, not “inadvertently,” challenges prevailing practices of soundscape composition. A closer listen to *N30* reveals that the graduated improvement of audio fidelity during the course of the composition—from clumsy lo-fi struggling at the

beginning to high-fidelity captures—is a substantial structural element of the work. Although Rösenberg does not admit me into his confraternity of “soundscape colleagues,” I would like to invite him and anyone else with open ears to consider phonography.

Field recording is over a century old, however phonography does not conform to established, commercially-driven ideas of “quality,” technique, “fidelity,” and subject matter.

As a phonographer, I seek to liberate the forbidden elements of field recording—mic handling noise, hiss, narrow frequency response, distorted proximity effect, haphazard directionality, drop-outs, device self-noise, glitchy edits—and not only erode the erroneous idea that recordings objectively represent one “reality” but admit those overt flaws as music. Today’s glitch is tomorrow’s melody. Such *verboden* elements can serve as a framing device, enabling transitions from transparent sequences to obviously recorded ones or may amplify, subvert or dispel the sense of place so fundamental to soundscape composition.

As a phonographer, I take a risky and experimental approach to field recording. Doubt damns my every step. For both *N30* pieces and *Live in New York at the Republican National Convention Protest September 2- August 28, 2004*, I aggressively plunged into a violent soundscape, risking my gear and personal safety. I live in an unjust world and therefore must act, rebelling when and where I can. Nonetheless, results, not willful sacrifice or “noble” intentions, make a work succeed.

Phonographers do not always uphold the long-standing ideal of recording invisibly, standing still or moving very slowly to document nature, scientific phenomena, or folk music with high-fidelity equipment. My body moves. Sometimes I run multiple microphone set-ups concurrently, corporeally improvising in the moment with body-mounted mics to shape the stereo image, azimuth, and the depth of field while swooping an additional microphone boom for a contrasting aural perspective.

As a phonographer, I know that the use of various and varying recording fidelities won’t demolish the ideal embodied by documentary nature recording, but instead expands the palette of procedures and techniques. Some artists recording in the field deploy a variety of microphones and recording equipment—including the tiny on-board mic in cassette

players, MiniDisc recorders, DAT, etc.—orchestrally, just as a composer of symphonic music weighs balances among woodwinds, brass, percussion, and strings.

As a phonographer, I affirm the inevitable influence (and presence!) of the recordist and recording gear both in the field and back in the studio. Sometimes it is enough to press play, wait, listen, press stop, and then cull an unedited, unprocessed segment as a complete piece. Yet usually listeners hear me, my struggle, my “incompetence,” my fortuitous discoveries, and my frustrated objectives.

Some phonographers radically transform their material; I do not, instead relying on aggressive editing (abrupt stops, dead silence, frenetic intercutting, obviously artificial polyphony, antiphonal spatialization, the traditional transparent cross-fade) to explore the intersection of speech and music, to preserve oral history made in the moment, and to convey the truth spoken by voices in crisis.

To my ears, phonography has a different subject matter: waterworks and plumbing, close-up recordings that transcend human hearing, and other ordinary (and extraordinary) sounds of daily life (a popping toaster, creaking bus flaps, etc.) that often remain ignored, processed into protoplasm by the latest plug-in, or merely consigned to the margins within soundscape compositions.

The essence of phonography entails capturing and transforming field recordings into a listening experience athwart the boundary of music and everyday sounds. Music, after all, is not notes and tones, but the deceptively difficult act of listening. Ultimately, phonographers and soundscape composers—the distinction may soon disappear—want everyone to hear the music the world makes.