

Sonic Acts Festival 'The Noise of Being', 23-26 February, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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Sonic Acts is a festival with a theme¹. Since 1994 it has explored themes at the intersections of art, technology, music and science by means of an international conference, concerts, performances, exhibitions and screenings. This year's theme was The Noise of Being. The curators introduced the theme in turbulent terms: "Every day, artists, hackers, diseases, natural disasters, stock market crashes, media, commodities and fascist oligarchs administer us with a brutal portion of dissonance. Even our geological time is subject to dispute: the catastrophic Anthropocene epoch seems to have arrived, while the Crapularity, an era in which 90% of everything that surrounds us is deemed garbage, is just around the corner. But while confusion is paramount and insecurity rules, no one would dare to refer to this time as the heyday of noise. There is more at stake than noise: we know too much to conflate these tragedies to a buzz."

Over the course of four days the festival explored the stakes of our time between buzz and noise. While none of the speakers and artists directly spoke to the idea of noise, I will take the liberty to locate it, both in (only a few) topics of conversation and in the format of the festival. So, where was noise?

Noise was there as an effect of governmentality. Eyal Weizman discussed the complexities of the threshold of the Naqab desert in southern Israel. It was along this threshold of the desert/non-desert that Israeli state campaigns to uproot Palestinian Bedouins were conducted. Using aerial

photographs, remote sensing data, state plans, court testimonies and nineteenth century travellers' accounts, Weizman showed the different temporalities of the threshold. It incorporated the temporality of the *longue durée*, with climate change altering the course of the threshold thereby prompting the Bedouins to move. Yet, the threshold also invited immediate response in border incidents, signalling in a split second who was in and who was out. Applying a mode of counter-forensics Weizman made us aware of the multiple dissonances that make up the signal.

Can we build shelters of signal and keep noise out? Artist Kate Cooper experimented with this in 'We Need Sanctuary', a video-installation that was part of the 'Noise of Being Art Exhibition'. In the work we see a computer-generated body that gracefully interacts with other coded objects. The body bleeds, however, more and more. As the body starts failing, so does its representation. The images do not look real – they are not real. The craft of the computer-generated image where reality is the representational objective, consists of the interaction between noise and signal. It is in this interaction that computer generated images are entities with power and intent. Their infrastructures are not freely available for us to use however we might wish, but instead entities that resist and demand fleshy engagement in order for noise to turn into signal.

Can we even distinguish between noise and signal in this time of fake news and the self-refer-

ential cocoons that algorithms build us? Designer and artist duo Metahaven showed 'The Sprawl', a film that deconstructs propaganda while at the same time throwing into confusion what is real, what is original, and what is intended. While the topic of the film is propaganda, the form of the film *does* the tension between information and disinformation as well. The film discusses *Russia Today's* news strategies while it shows footage of president Ronald Reagan whom it describes as an actor in the caption. Peter Pomerantsev — author of the book *Nothing is Real and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* — says in the film: "I used to think propaganda was about persuading people. Now it doesn't seem to be about that. It's just about disrupting the other side." 'The Sprawl' forcefully confronts the viewer with the difficult distinction between persuasion and disruption, and who decides about this difference.

Noortje Marres' talk raised the question of attuning to noise and signal. In the context of driverless cars, she discussed the participation of users in the testing of these cars without formal official approval for the testing regime. This situation undermines protocols of accountability in testing, and this indifference to the formal inclusion of the public puts democracy in question. Marres argues that democracy makes certain kinds of accountability and experimentation visible while remaining blind to others. It requires imagination, or experiments in translation, to explicate the complexities involved in driverless car testing and their consequences for relations of accountability.

Noise was not just what Sonic Acts was about. Noise was also how the festival was done. A mix of styles, jargons, and disciplines, it wasn't always easy to know of which "post-human predicaments" we were speaking, or what kind of "ontological catastrophes" we were invited to imagine. But while we must acknowledge that people did not speak the same language — in the many senses of language — it is equally important to recognize there was not much attempt at a conversation either. While the festival's curators introduced each panel carefully, they left little to no time for questions from the audience and collective exchange.

Revealing my commitment to the codes of academic language use, even if these are often not lived up to in academic settings either, I realized I was annoyed by the masses of people walking in and out of talks and screenings, just sampling and moving on. My hope was for some conversation after the talks to guide me through some of the more obscure talks and to make sense of jarring juxtapositions. I felt myself to be in a minority as people floated in and out of sessions, seeing a bit of film or art here, hearing part of a talk there, and most probably dancing off any dissonance during the club program, while I was home with my two-year-old.

It was after all a festival and one to celebrate noise perhaps in the way that Michel Serres speaks of it in *The Parasite* (1982). Without noise, Serres claims, there is no communication. Without noise, there would hardly be a relation, as sender and receiver would be fully similar. Noise then is what makes translations necessary, and transformation possible. To understand how these mediations happen requires being there where the noise is, risking oneself between one and the other - *being* the relation. This reminds me of Helen Verran's presentation at the festival. She juxtaposed two Australian stories. One was an advertisement video made by Meat and Livestock Australia. The setting is a barbecue at an Australian beach hosted by Indigenous people. One by one the European and Asia-Pacific settlers arrive in their boats. The ad was released on Australia day and celebrates diversity by asking, aren't we all boat people? And later on, without mentioning Australia day which marks the arrival of the first British ships, the answer to the question "What is the occasion?" is "Do we need one?" The elimination of noise makes for a sameness that allows for simple capitalization and the selling of lamb chops. The ad was contrasted with a story that was told to an anthropologist in Australia's Arnhem Land in the 1950s. The story teller was Marwalan, a Yolngu Aboriginal Australian leader, who used the words and the logic of his Yolngu language. This language does not designate spatio-temporal entities, but rather designates relations. Being the relation, speaking the relation, is like being the noise. It requires assiduous engagement and investment to make a signal.

Noise troubles the idea of sameness and order that often animate our expectations of and aspirations for the social. Noise brings to mind our partially connected engagements, projects, and hopes. While noise produces trouble and

disconnection, this is not all bad. As noise always demands engagement to produce signal, these may enable new communicative practices and relations.

References

Serres M (1982) *The Parasite*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Notes

1 <http://www.sonicacts.com/2017/festival>