

The Pastoral & the Acousmatic in Christina Kubisch's Five Electrical Walks

Joseph Chaves

University of Northern Colorado

joseph.chaves@unco.edu

Abstract

This paper examines Christina Kubisch's *Five Electrical Walks* (hereafter *FEW*) as an instance of the musical and literary genre of the pastoral—and, more particularly, of the tradition of *rus in urbe*, which finds the country in the city. In auditing the pastoral, listeners sometimes naively take sonic representations as more or less straightforward mirrors of Nature, either as concept or material. Conversely, we may seek to demystify the genre, revealing the artifice and technological mediation inherent in its production of transparency and purity. I want to suggest that the 'naïve' approach and the 'critical' approach are not mutually exclusive—indeed, that the work of any pastoral is to coordinate these attitudes towards its material. This is particularly the case with *FEW*, where the electromagnetic signals that the piece reveals both discover the profound artificiality of the modern city and divulge 'another Nature' at the city's core.

1. Introduction

Christina Kubisch's *Five Electrical Walks* makes use of a special kind of field recording, indicated in the subtitle in Important Records' 2008 CD release: "Electromagnetic Investigations in the City." Both the title and the subtitle bring into relief the relationship between a peripatetic auditor, the piece's urban sounds and its means of recording them. Like many other works Kubisch has produced, *FEW* makes art out of sounds derived from the process of electromagnetic induction. In heading out on a walk through the city, participants don special headphones by which "electromagnetic fields are detected, amplified, and made audible" (Kubisch). Kubisch equips the walker with a map specifying those areas the artist finds most interesting and dense with signals, but the walker ultimately chooses where to go, and the sources of electromagnetic signals are ubiquitous and virtually infinite: streetcar cables, anti-theft devices, navigation systems, ATMs, neon signs, and so on. Liner notes tell us that pieces were derived from field recordings in cities from Berlin to Tokyo, including Madrid, London, Taipei and many others.

So *FEW* coordinates several different kinds of signals, some audible and others not. The headphones quiet the customary sounds of everyday life in the city, while the sources of such sounds of course remain visible. Of the sounds in the headphones, some may be equivocally identifiable. While we know these signals convey coded messages—directing trains, connecting phones, transporting money—the content of such messages remains even more opaque to us than their provenance. Thus, the sounds derived from these signals are acousmatic in a special sense. As Kubisch has it, the signals "create electrical fields that are as if hidden

under cloaks of invisibility, but of incredible presence” (Kubisch). The originary signals of *FEW* are different than other forms of field recording because they are both ‘not there’ and ‘more there’—i.e., not exactly part of the perceptible world, but also, made audible, the manifestation of a hidden reality which we may experience as ‘behind’ or ‘hidden in’ the normally apparent.

In these several ways, *FEW* participates in Kubisch’s longtime concern with the relationship between “the true and the false, the natural and the artificial” (Lane & Carlyle 64). Especially because it addresses these oppositions through spatiality, *FEW* may be considered an instance of the musical and literary form called *the pastoral*, as the genre opposes and compares country and city, nature and culture (Chew & Jander). Indeed, in typically pastoral fashion, *FEW* generates series of paradigmatic oppositions under these oppositional headings: the city is false, disconcerting, discordant, conventional, mutable, while the country is true, calming, harmonious, spontaneous, and ever-same. In those ways it reverses these terms, *FEW* is not so much an anti-pastoral as an instance of the *rus in urbe* tradition, that sub-species of pastoral by which the city is described in terms normally reserved for the country. *FEW* finds the country in the city by parsing its electromagnetic waves, which represent not only artificiality and technology, but also ‘nature’: the organic harmony of the city; the reality behind appearances.

And yet, this is not so say that the city is simply identified with nature. Like pastoral in general, the *rus in urbe* possesses an ample capacity for reversal. While it’s possible, at any given moment, that pastoral conventions fit surprisingly well and the city proves to have its own forms of organicism, it’s also possible that we take the city’s claims to naturalness ironically, so that the artificiality of the city comes into relief against the pastoral conventions applied to it.

Indeed, *FEW* places all of these interpretive possibilities in dialogue, exploiting the pastoral’s fundamental capacity for ambiguity to the maximum. While we might expect the pastoral to hold the antithesis between values associated with the country and those associated with the city in rigid opposition, I will contend that the kind of reversibility, instability, and flexibility that I’m beginning to show is fundamental to the genre; its antitheses function in ways that tend not to be mutually exclusive, but rather continuous and dynamic.

2. The City vs. Nature and the City as Nature

In attempting to make sense of this rich play of manifest and hidden signals, how ought we to understand their urban provenance? On the one hand, *FEW* may be taken to reveal the ugly, inorganic character of the city. Its timbres and patterns connote artificiality, partly through the characteristics of the sounds as such. The alien-sounding screeches, aperiodic buzzes, inscrutable whirs, and monotonous pulses that come into being as Kubisch’s listener moves on foot through the city not only connote artificiality ‘in themselves,’ but also draw on a long tradition of associating noise with “the built environments of industrial cities.” As David Novak observes, “noise is usually understood as a technologically produced field of sound, which is superimposed on a natural or social environment. In ecological terms, noise is a ‘pollution’ that degrades the sonic balance of nature.” *FEW*’s “noise” is inaudible until the piece comes along to embody it, but once it does so it’s easy to feel as though we have new access to something that was always ‘there,’ waiting to be heard and named. On this understanding, which we can associate with acoustic ecology, the “noisy” aspects of Kubisch’s electromagnetic fields-made-audible reveal how our environment has become artificial in ways not usually available to the senses. In this sense, *FEW* may be viewed as a (playful? -sardonic? -sincere?) extension of

Murray Schafer's belief that, "before its harmful subliminal effects can be corrected, noise must first be located and brought back into human consciousness from its ubiquitous but subliminal position in the modern soundscape" (Novak 129; Schafer).

Perhaps surprisingly, on the other hand, we might understand the audible electromagnetic fields as a form of 'Nature' to be found at the core of the city. For one thing, the electrical walk takes us into a world of gratuitous sensible experience, completely unlinked from the usual imperatives for instrumental or even 'correct' navigation. In this sense, *FEW* recalls the soundwalks of Hildegard Westerkamp, which seek to transport us from a world in which we instrumentally attend to some sounds while ignoring others to an environment to which we needn't respond beyond acts of awareness (Westerkamp). In particular, *FEW* evokes *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), which attempts to situate the listener in a middle ground—far enough from the city both to achieve a more concentrated, conscious, active listening and to become aware of the way that the presence of urban noise can make such forms of attention difficult. By locating such an experience in a highly mediated, urban environment, however, *FEW* inverts the structure of Westerkamp's soundwalks. In moving through the city's newly accrued phenomenal dimensions, the walker not only discovers the "hidden sounds" of electromagnetic fields, but also rediscovers the city she has already known. The activity of the electrical walk thus pursues a process of defamiliarization by which the walker's environment is no longer simply *to be recognized*, but rather must be *perceived* once again (Shklovsky).

3. Space and Modes of Listening

This complex phenomenal situation reconfigures our modes of listening. As walkers, our sense of the sounds' sources is both ineluctable and weak; it must be approximate, because it derives from mere proximity, a loose form of one-dimensional space. We might say the sounds possess a 'soft causality.' At the same time, we must know that the shape of the signals we hear is motivated by their semantic character: train switches 'say' which track is active now; security gates receive and send their messages too. We recognize the existence of the semantic dimension of signals 'before' they are translated into audible waves via electromagnetic induction, and yet the semantic content of these signals is closed off from our apprehension. This 'first' moment is available to us intelligibly but not sensibly; it is present *to* us but not *for* us. Conversely, in a second moment, we recognize that what we are hearing is not, at bottom, sound, but rather signals translated (again, arbitrarily) into the realm of human audition. This, in turn, renders those sounds utterly unmotivated on semantic terms, so that they become purely sensible data. What we might call *the semantic at one remove* renders the sounds profoundly gratuitous; not only do they lack the purposefulness of their 'original' function; they are not even determined by the purposiveness of musical development.

On the electrical walks, moreover, one may find that the sounds exhibit an inherent organic order. As Kubisch has it, "The sounds are much more musical than one could expect" (Kubisch). The sounds represent nature inasmuch as they seem both aesthetically pleasing and found, given, unreconstructed, uncontaminated by the composer's artifice. Something 'musical' comes into shape not from silence but out of a field of chaos. Taking pleasure in an object that only equivocally presents itself to our judgment, we discover an order that must constantly make us hear its precarity.

The electrical walks' nature-culture antitheses are reversible and unstable, too, in the ways they represent the equivocal actuality of phenomena. In its discovery of the city's "hidden sounds,"

FEW shows our habitual environs to be deceptive. Revealing the inorganic essence at the core of urban life, *FEW* indexes a potentially terrifying ‘infra-world’--alien, noisy, unreal, chaotic, inhuman--beneath the city’s apparent sense and normalcy (Bonnet). At the same time, in separating out *true* and *false*, this movement purports to discover the real in the newly-audible. In other words, the manifestation of the piece’s sonic content may appear as a kind of lifting of a sonic veil: the materialization of the actual underneath the city’s usual surface appearance. In effecting this flickering true-false dynamic, then, does *FEW* discover the profound artificiality at the core of the modern city or does it reveal ‘another nature’ beneath the city’s specious forms of coherence?

4. Conclusion

I have been trying to show how, like the traditions of the field recording and the soundwalk on which it draws, *FEW* is structured by grand antitheses between the urban and the rural, culture and nature. However, to an extraordinary degree, the electrical walks render those oppositions indeterminate or reversible, so that elements that we might, at first, want to associate with ‘nature,’ turn out to have more to do with ‘culture,’ and vice-versa. The point is that the nature-culture relationship is less dichotomous, more plastic and dynamic than we often think of it in field recording in general.

Several analyses, including those of Seth Kim-Cohen and David Michael, have cast healthy suspicion on field recording’s commonest forms of pastoralism. Excluding darker dimensions of nature such as waste, death, and above all the effects of human activity on the natural world, field recordings of fauna and flora often portray “a pastoral world in which the only sign of man is the recording itself.” Much field recording is therefore “steeped in fantasy” (Michael 207), occulting its own reliance on human and technological intervention.

The converse danger of the ‘naïve’ approach to field recording, however, is to presume it always attempts a strict separation between the rural and the urban, nature and culture, so that any violation of this rigid structure can be read as ideological. A piece like *FEW* violates—or better, enriches—its own opposing terms in order to perform the work of mediation. Exactly what’s getting mediated in all the walks is a very broad question, but we can say provisionally that it involves the way we understand the relationship between our immediate environs and the signals that penetrate and inform them. *FEW* manages to ask some of the important questions of soundscape ecology while productively eschewing its more aprioristic answers. By not determining in advance what is noise and what’s music, where beauty is to be found and lost, *FEW*’s agnosticism about the contents of its sounds opens up space for experience and judgment. Conversely, *FEW* explores the dynamics of suspicion, interrogating and sometimes embracing the way demystification seeks new forms of innocence. Thus *FEW* finds a middle ground analogous to that of the soundwalk not because it finds a tenable space between innocence and suspicion, but because it doesn’t allow us to inhabit either one consistently, constantly revealing their interpenetration.

5. Works Cited

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