

# THE SILENCE OF SEA TOWER

*MFA Thesis by Venia Ramm  
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## SUMMARY

The Silence of Sea Tower is an auto fictional, site-specific sound art piece that I self-released on cassette tape in May 2023. Nine months of sound recordings, from my artist studio in Helsinki where I live, are composed into a soundscape situating itself between ambient noise music, field recording, and conceptual spatial art. It is a sonic portrait of an office building, and the sociocultural space it constitutes, with a focus on the noise that occurs in the silence.

By positioning myself as both artist, audience and material in the process, I have embodied the work, and site, for a total duration of one year. With this project, I curate my imagined experience of a place as I navigate it by ear.

The project has been an ongoing conversation with myself, observing and examining my surroundings and myself within that framework, inhabiting multiple roles and perspectives in the process, and moving through different stages of listening and sounding.

The work is performed live as a concert iteration titled Narrative Noise, played on an orchestra of analogue tape players. The first presentation was the self-organised release party on May 31<sup>st</sup>, this performance being the official public presentation of the thesis project.

The composition is deconstructed and reconstructed as a live collage, making each performance a new, unique version of the piece.

Live, the soundscape is verbally narrated to present the tower and its inhabitants, incorporating elements of storytelling and opening anthropomorphic aspects of the work that are hiding on the tape.

The written component of the work expands on central concepts like listening and composing, silence and noise, and further examines subliminal themes of the work such as time, loneliness, perceived binary opposition, and agency.

# TECH SHEET

## **The Silence of Sea Tower**

Sound art, 97 minutes on cassette tape.

Standard C95 ferric tape, tape-casing from recycled plastic in frosty aqua colour, produced in England. Clear plastic cover-case.

J card covers and stickers designed from online templates, laser colour print. 7-panel J cards printed on standard copy paper, cut and folded by hand, stickers printed on blank, pre-cut sticker sheets.

Graphic design: fold-out photo of Meritorni shot in the blue hour, several shades of night and morning available. Photo edited with Photoshop and InDesign. Tape sides are marked by stickers of the building in night and day colours on each side. Tapes are randomly rewound to either day or night side before distribution.

All sound production by Xenia Ramm, 2023.

## **Narrative Noise**

Performance concert, live iteration of The Silence of Sea Tower.

Deconstructed and reconstructed composition performed on multiple tape players, with verbal narration expanding the soundscape with elements of storytelling.

Presented for the public for the first time in Vapaan Taiteen Tila on 31.5.23, release party with live performance.

## INTRODUCTION

The Silence of Sea Tower is an auto fictional, site-specific sound art piece, painting a sonic portrait of a building and the liminal aural space between its inhabitants, with a focus on the noise that occurs in the silence.

Nine months of ambient field recordings, from my artist studio where I live, are self-released on cassette tape as a soundscape situating itself between ambient noise music, field recording, and conceptual spatial art. By inhabiting my workspace, the epicentre of this project, and positioning myself as artist, audience and material in the process, I have embodied the work, and site, for a total duration of one year. With this project, I curate my imagined experience of a place, with sound as medium and material. The packaging and distribution format, cassette tape, allows the portrayed place to be experienced outside of itself, the sound of the site removed from its original context.

The Silence of Sea Tower (from here on out mentioned as SoS) is performed live as the iteration Narrative Noise (from here on out mentioned as NN), played on an orchestra of analogue tape players each adding their own mechanical sounds and characteristics to the mix. The concert format deconstructs and reconstructs the composition as a live collage, making each performance a new, unique version of the piece.

Live, the soundscape is narrated to present the tower and its inhabitants, incorporating elements of storytelling and opening anthropomorphic aspects of the work that are hiding on the tape.

The written component of the work, this thesis, expands on central concepts like listening and composing, silence and noise, and it further examines subliminal themes of the work such as time, loneliness, sociocultural space, perceived binary opposition, and agency. Moving between sound and text lets me express ideas and opinions in different voices. This project has been an ongoing conversation with myself, observing and examining my surroundings and myself within that framework, playing with multiple roles and perspectives.

In my year-long research related to this project, I have come across, and absorbed, ideas of sound art and listening formulated by many artists and scholars. SoS is a more a fantastical portrait – and self-portrait – than a documentary. It is more an artwork than a research project.

The work nods to the history of field recording, from the perspective of a composer working with electronic music, with a conceptual approach based in site-specific art. The work borrows musical styles from genres such as ambient and noise, and utilises nostalgic elements, cassette tapes and -players, for their visual and sonic aesthetics and conceptual application.

The format of this work makes it easy to implement in different settings and for different audiences, allowing the content to be perceived and experienced as a fine art concept or musical performance – and anywhere between.

# THE TOWER

*There is a tower by the sea. An artist is in a pocket of the tower, works, lives in the tower, is still in the tower. The artist is in the bottom of the tower, and cannot see the sea. The tower is very tall, and can see everything.*

*The tower by the sea is full of people working, moving around. They do not speak, not to each other, and not to the tower. The tower tries to speak to them, but they do not hear it, and if they do they have ignored it for many years. At night the people are gone. The silence is noisy. The tower has many inhabitants that aren't human. Electric veins crackles through the empty hallways. Machines talk to each other. But one night, an artist is moving around, working. An artist is in a pocket of the tower, works, lives in the tower, is still in the tower.*

*The tower listens to its new inhabitant. This person does not leave the tower at night. This person is quiet when the other people make sound, and makes sound when the other people are gone. It is okay to be noisy in the silence. The artist sings in the tower, to the tower, in the night. The tower sings back. The artist listens. The artist is in the bottom of the tower, and cannot see the sea. The tower is very tall, and can see everything. The tower tells stories about the sea, tells what it can see. The tower breathes wind from the sea through the walls, around the building, touching the skin of the artist.*

*An artist lives alone in a tower by the sea. She hides in a pocket of a building, far down and out of sight. She cannot see the sea, and nobody sees her. She stays quiet in the day, when the tower is full of people working. At night she swims through the hallways, singing. In the night, when the tower is silent, the artist can hear the sea in her pocket.*

(Promotional poetry)

## The Sound

### Site-Specific Silence

The Sea Tower is a real place and a fictional place. The two places co-exist in my mind, and in the work, overlapping in indiscernible layers and multiplications. Feedbacks of perception and possible narratives, materiality and imagination reshaping the sound of one another. The tower is not merely my field of recording, it is an entity, a universe in and of itself; a performer, a listener, and a place of performance. Each pocket of the building has its own story playing out, protagonists in all directions. SoS is the story of one pocket, one corner of the tower.

SoS is my curation of the sound of this place, as heard by my ears, an interpretation, a semi-fictional version of my life, a moment in this place's history caught in time and space on tape.

In this reimagined soundscape, a parallel world emerges with similar yet peculiar, particular narratives. I composed and conduct reality, bend it as needed for this sound sculpture, carve out a pocket-sized storyline for others to experience. Familiar objects and characters are recognised in their sounding liveliness and given a platform on which to perform.

The building speaks for itself, producing sounds from the bones in its construction to the mechanics of installed fixtures and amenities. Within the building, performers sing their own songs, and sing to each other. Human and non-human, people and inanimate inhabitants.

## **My Pocket**

A wooden shelf-system divides my 19 square meters into two semi-separated areas: business in the front, secrets in the back. When entering, you move through a door, a curtain, and walk through my workspace, before you are in my home; deeper and deeper into the pocket. I have a lot of plants, like an indoor jungle in which I have built a nest.

Behind my office is my bedroom. A raised, queen-sized bed I have built from old Euro pallets, with continuous shelves wrapping around it, showcasing my entire wardrobe neatly folded into dense, categorised piles. Under the bed I store things, everything fits when I organise it the right way.

There is only one step from my bed to my kitchen, where some of the most prominent performers of SoS live. It is a compact, improvised kitchen without running water, and all my furniture and appliances are old, second-hand characters who clearly lived long and eventful lives before I adopted them. I have given up on multicourse meals and advanced appliances such as blenders. I have enough fridge space for one week's groceries at a time.

There are two large steps between my kitchen and my office; enough space to dance in one direction, or to dry one load of laundry on the fold-out rack. You can see the oven from my office, but other tell-tales of my living arrangements are hiding behind the tall shelving full of machines and materials: monitor screens, lamps, projectors, typewriters, boxes of tools and tape, cables, and tape players.

Outside my studio there is a hallway, or rather: hallways, interconnected, yet again interconnected with even more hallways behind different doors. A curtain of two recycled duvet covers hang on the inside of my door, an extra membrane between me and the hallway, keeping cooking smells – and sounds, not least – slightly better trapped inside. I keep outwear on a homemade wardrobe rack drilled into the wall just inside the door, and shoes on a shoe shelf across from that. These items create a rather homy entry arch, but I keep my door closed in the daytime – and the curtains are always closed, providing a visual though not aural boundary between me and the hallway. Besides, the coats provide excellent acoustic isolation in my office corner.

## **Panoramic Darkness**

I am on one of the lowest floors in this very tall building. I cannot see the water, but I know where it is; so near, so comforting. Water in a city brings with it an inherent calmness factor - someone once told me that. The ocean is not always calm, but neither am I. I think I would be able to see it, if I was just one or two floors higher up.

It is a South-West facing corner room, with seven windows: a wall-to-wall painting of the outside. No buildings are blocking my view; my own panoramic sky-cinema. My curtains are alive, a leafy camouflage net that lets me look out while slightly hiding me inside.

I have a tree outside my window, but the leaves only cover the light at the time of year when there is almost nothing but that; light, all the time, natural light, sunshine inside so I do not need to feel shame about not going out.

I do not see the water, but I see a lot of sky. The sun shines in through the glass walls, builds a bridge between me and the heavens. My bed is built in the same height as the windows, so I can lie in the darkness of my room and enjoy the silent show of the sun dancing from one day to another, from one end of my widescreen to the other.

The darkness approaches faster on the inside, the outside is so big, it moves slow. In this room, I do not mind the darkness, I feel safe in my pocket. When darkness falls, the other side of the wall falls silent; the neighbours go home.

When I lie still, in quiet anticipation of change, I can hear the whole world humming in the distance; far away whispers that I do not need to understand. The autumn storm tries to squeeze through the narrow edge of the window, wheezing and tooting and announcing itself. In that sound the water is very near, as if the wind declares not only its own presence but that of the water as well. The open water lets the wind travel here smoothly; together, they sing a fierce duet.

Three round lamps hang above my bed. Each their shade of sunset. I can choose between all the combinations of warmth, depending on how much I need to brighten. My cocoon's colours contrast with the backdrop; fiery balloons bouncing on the waves of the celestial ocean. It feels like an old fairy-tale illustration, or a movie set from the early days of colour film. I live in a painting. I am the artwork experiencing itself.

The sky is best in transition, night and day dancing are my favourite



colours. I greedily swallow the sky with my eyes, a pastel watercolour backdrop morphing into a new scene every second. If I do not blink or look away, I can suck every tone of turquoise until dark, royal blue wraps the world in a velvet cape and makes it disappear like a magic trick.

This is my blue hour: the overlap when I turn the lights on, blinds open, aware the outside can look in from its darkness. The visuals are so wonderful, I do not care. Day and night, in and out, private and public. For a short while these opposites seem to swap places, and the moment they pass each other, touch, is a special rite of passage. Depending on the time of year, this hour is either very quiet, or busy with rush-hour traffic trailing the vicinity.

When I finally close the blinds, I turn my gaze inside. Allowing myself to only contain myself, I forget the rest of the world for the rest of the day.

## Swamp Songs

The vinyl flooring in the hallway is swamp-green, with stints of black and white stripes. Everything is lit by tube lights, all the tubes are of different age and are running out of life at different intervals, some flickering wildly. The tubes sing rather loud, with each their otherworldly, electrical voice. The fixtures are as old as the rest of the building, down here in the swamp; they only renovate the ocean view.

The electric light orchestra sings songs of another era, from an inconsiderate time of bad lighting in the workspace. Electric crackling, mechanic rustling, the sound of age and negligence. Endless flickering, tubes no longer strong enough to push through but still hanging in there, trying their best, shouting for help. The closer to death they get, the louder they scream for their life. A choir of angry death rattles, screaming veins throughout the building, energy moving around. They each sing their own songs of doom, with each their voice, and I keep being surprised by their volume and clarity. A static stampede, rattling, panicked voices following me, competing for my attention as I wander in the night.

The ventilation shafts in the bathrooms sing, in high-pitched, rhythmic choirs. The bathroom to the left sings more beautifully than the one to the right. Maybe they have practiced more.

When the tube lights are off, the hallway is lit by emergency-exit signs. They are like guide dogs: well trained, do not speak a word, do not utter a sound. Silent duty. Flooding the tower in gloomy green, turning swamp into ocean with little crests of white foam on the surface. A quiet, dim vacuum below the waves. I swim through the underwater tunnel, sing out loud the songs in my head when no one is here to listen to my bubbles.

During my blue hour, when I move in and out of my red room and the green hallway, my studio feels like a warmly lit cabin in a boat, surrounded by dark ocean colours of evening sky and outdated linoleum. My little, red boat, floating in this tower of sea.





The Hallway



The Swamp

## Silent Shadows

I navigate my new home via sound. I watch my surroundings through the walls, the blind voyeur, seeing with my ears. I discern other people's presence and movements from the sounds they share. I get to know my neighbours, though they do not get to know me.

Doors opening, closing, slamming. I believe I can identify all the doors from the sound of them, it took me two months to get to know them this well. I can almost hear whether someone is coming or going, the different force of a push or pull, the difference between opening and closing, arriving or departing, is ever so slightly distinct if you pay close attention.

Three heavy hallway doors of metal and glass, all loud. The door from the elevator lobby has an electronic keyhole, it shouts a long, frustrated beep, and opens by itself but only with resistant hesitation. The door to the next hallway slams, but not too loud. The door to the back stairs, from which you can only exit, not enter, does not close properly unless you slam it with violent force. People have not spoken nicely to this door, so now it only answers if you shout at it – a vicious cycle of abuse.

Four toilet doors: two bathrooms each with two doors, from the hallway to the sink area, and from the sink area to the stall. I cannot hear the inner doors from my studio. People only properly close the door between the hallway and the sink when they are inside the bathroom, when they leave, they usually just leave it open or carelessly slam it to appear closed. It is not a harsh slam; the sound is softer than that of the door being closed properly. If the bathroom doors are not properly closed, merely pushed shut, they open and close from the pressure of a slight air vacuum when other doors nearby are opened; the tower breathes and connects us all.

A door to the janitor or cleaners' supply closet, down the hall from the bathrooms. This small room has a big sink, so this is where I do my dishes. This door will only close if you really want it to, it binds so it only shuts closed if you push or pull a bit upwards. It requires some dedication, but the sound only makes a stump thud and does not reflect the force behind it.

During my first week in the tower, there was a violent break-in and vandalism at night, a man broke the front door and destroyed furniture and windows in all the rooms he could enter, just two floors up from mine. I was sleeping, my door was not locked, I was woken up by two policemen opening my door and entering my room, pointing flashlights, searching for the intruder. I was afraid the police would tell me landlord I was living here. I was afraid of being alone in the tower at night, not knowing how common it was for someone to break in at night. That was the last time I forgot to lock my door.

I spent a few months after that, listening anxiously through my door at night, carefully trying to identify whether approaching footsteps belonged in the building. How do you move through a space when you have a right to be there? How do you walk if you are uninvited? Can you hear someone's agenda in their movements? How many different ways can you open the same door?

Careful listening requires attention. If I am sounding, I cannot listen. I must pause myself, move my ears out of my own space, out of me, into the outside. Action replaced with observation, displacement of presence, physical stillness while my mind sweeps the halls. It is a compromise.

The silence is ambiguous. Alone, I am free to be (me) here, my ears can relax when there is nothing to hear. But alone I am, no matter whose footsteps walk past my door, and in the silence even the smallest sound shouts a sudden echo – like the clock hanging from the ceiling in the hallway, each tick causing me to stop in my tracks and point my ears until I learned how small a sound that harrowing one-minute mark actually is.

## The Performers

The performers are those who sound in the soundscape; everyone in the field, human and non-human actors alike. The performers are also those who perform the recorded sound, the machines reproducing and presenting the source material in the making of SoS and live on stage. The only conscious performer, aware of their participation in this project, is me. All other contributors are either unknowingly part of a documented field or inanimate collaborators to whom I have assigned roles in the project.

We share performative agency in this piece, and though I do not extend formal or monetary accreditation to any of my oblivious collaborators, I do acknowledge their participation and have incorporated this aspect in the live narration of the work. Regarding the machines in my care, I pay them back by cleaning them and fixing them when they break, just like I tend to the tower and do my part to keep it maintained; cleaning surfaces, letting fresh air in, repairing blinds, unclogging drains.

I do not know if other residents realise the wonder of this place, how much it is alive even without people. Maybe someone else, in another pocket on another floor, has spent just as many hours here in silence as I, roaming the hallways alone in the night, singing when they think no human ears are listening. Maybe other people live here too, in their own secrecy. There are potentially multiple fairy tales being acted out simultaneously in the tower, maybe several people could be portraying this place in their work; maybe I unknowingly appear in others' recordings.

## The People (Neighbours)

The people on my floor is a mix of artists and office workers, but not the kind that wears suits.

Staying under the radar, keeping a low profile in my position in the tower, I avoid interaction with most people in the tower. I would prefer interacting socially with my surroundings, getting to know the people I share a space with, but I do not want to risk someone asking me questions, and I cannot invite people into my secrecy unless I trust them enough; hence, I keep an anonymous presence in the tower.

On one side of my pocket, behind my neatly folded wall of wardrobe, there are two young guys working with music. Mostly ambient, electronic music, but one of them also plays a guitar and sings. They mostly work with headphones, but sometimes I get to lie in my bed and enjoy ambient harmonies of mellow synthesizers. I like it when I can hear their music, but I do not like that the wall is thin in both directions. When I can hear their music, it means they are not wearing headphones.

My clothes are multifunctional, they work as acoustic isolation, muffling what moves between us. Before the fashion-fortification I could almost hear what they talked about on the other side. They speak in Swedish but sing in Finnish. I wondered how much they heard me, sleeping right on the other side of what felt like translucent cardboard.

Behind the other wall, a lot of people share a big room. They are neither young nor old. I imagine that they do something creative in an office setting, something that you can do by a desk but still share with others; I imagine that they are writers of a sort.

They have meetings, sometimes small parties. One time, I think someone slept there for a few days – I heard her crying in the night and felt sad that we were worlds apart in our pockets, alone on each our side of the wall.

## **The Machines (Roommates)**

In the silence of my loneliness, my amenities turned into roommates. When I started listening to them as individuals instead of devices, they came alive and became my companions.

They look inanimate, but they sound lively. They breathe and talk and sing, with each their pitch and rhythm, and they all have distinct personality traits. The sounding world animates.

My mechanical friends have their own voice, they talk at different times and in different pace, style; with individual personality traits. Some of them are very enthusiastic, like Cylinda (fridge) and Mustang (oven), but they both have a unique temper and show their excitement and love of communication in their own way. Some take a while to get going, they need to warm up to me and get comfortable in the conversation, like Wilfa (electric kettle) and Bialetti (espresso jug). It took me a while to get to know them all, and perhaps for them to get to know me.

At first, Cylinda's songs were incessant. It felt like she was trying to compensate for something, the volume of her sound not seemingly adequate for her size. I would complain loudly in the late night, unnervingly trying to fall asleep in the wee hours before the looming symphony of morning traffic and construction work would wake up the world around me.

Later, I learned to appreciate that her repertoire is very diverse, and she has an impressive vocal register with even soft passages being audible and airy parts enunciated clearly.

Cylinda is the only one of my machines that I have assigned a gender, I avoid using pronouns for any of the others as it feels impossible or irrelevant. She is the only one that I intuitively knew I was not misgendering.

It took two fuses for me and Mustang to get along. Even though this is a steady and sturdy companion, expecting full capacity usage is too much to ask. It is inadvertently the tower who pays the price when I push the limits of this relationship, so I have accepted the terms and indulged in a life of one-pot dishes and stir fries.

The little ones (Wilfa and Bialetti) do not make much trouble. They are there for me when I need them, otherwise they calmly keep to themselves.

## My Sound

After the break-in, when I became curious about the sound of belonging, I started wondering how I sounded in the space, and if my sound changed at night when no one else was there. I started wondering if my neighbours had noticed my sounds, if they had noticed the sound of someone not only working, but living, in the tower.

Even without voice, I still produce sound(s). Some sounds are acceptable, belonging in the workspace: I do not need to hide them outside of office hours. Some sounds belong in a home, a normal home, these sounds are after-hour sounds that I keep for myself and the tower at night. I colour-code the sounds of my life, draw a time-map to hide within, write a score for my day and night. I prefer to do most of my sounding at night, when I am outside other people's earshot. The colour coding is not a ruleset, merely an investigative guideline to try and understand myself as a sounding being in a shared acoustic environment. The only reason why this reflection and division is meaningful is because I do not wish to give away my precarious position in the building. If I did not live here, I would care less about what people thought of my activities and their sounds.

Green sounds are sounds that belong in a workspace, sounds produced as a result of work activity, or sounds common enough that they exist in all kinds of spaces at any time of day. It is implied that loud workers take their neighbours into consideration, those who make music use headphones in the daytime and bands rehearse at night. This overview of my sounds is less about my actual work sounds, and more about all the other sounds I produce: the sound of my everyday life.

Yellow sounds are sounds that do not necessarily give away the fact that I live here but are not stable in an office. Red sounds are the sounds you usually hear in a home. These are not common activities in a place of work, and might incidentally give away my residential presence.

Time of day, quantity and duration means a lot when determining the colour coding. A singular sound is not much of a clue, but repetitive sounds, or a combination of sounds, paints a sonic picture of a situation. Sounds tell stories. The longer the series of sounds, the longer, more detailed the story. Context and timeline can help build a setting. E.g., an alarm clock on my phone is more conspicuous in the morning than in the afternoon, and even more so if it is heard every morning around the same time. Sleeping in your studio is not necessarily wrong or odd, but sleeping there every day tells a story of someone who does not have anywhere else to sleep.

### Sound examples include, but are not limited to:

**Green sounds:** electric kettle, coffee making, power tools or other mechanical work sound, vacuum noise, talking, small dishes (cups etc.), small cooking (e.g. microwave).

**Yellow sounds:** fridge, medium cooking (e.g. heating something on a hotplate), medium dishes (plates, cutlery etc.), watching films and shows, listening to music and podcasts, the metallic rattling of my drying rack and the sounds of clothes hangers, singing, sex.

**Red sounds:** toothbrushing, snoring, alarm clock, big cooking and large dishes (e.g. the sound of oven plates, pots and pans).

## The Field

The field of recording is my studio and the immediate common surroundings: the hallway area right outside my studio, the two common bathrooms in this hallway. The whole tower is the field; sound moves as vibrations through the structure of the building. Movement travels up and down, making loose metal elements rattle above my bed, electricity runs through tube veins, air whooshes through canals. The insides of the tower are crackling and humming, sounds travelling through materials, between rooms and across floors, all the way through the tall body.

The field extends to the surrounding outdoor environment of streets, green areas and water. I do not know how far sounds travel through the air from the outside in, what I can comprehend with my ears and what the recorder can catch, because the sonic field is hard to map out precisely.

I have recorded the sound of my aloneness, but I have not been alone in the field at any time of recording. My human neighbours and the outside world appear here and there, as subliminal ghosts that I am not always capable of discerning in my (re)listening. Even if we all keep our individual volume down as to not disturb each other we usually produce some level of sound, and even if we sit completely still and do nothing it is essentially impossible to not affect the sound of the field by our mere material presence in the sonic field of vibration.

I do not know what constitutes the noise floor of the tower, it is not a constant combination of objects and events, and I never know if I am completely alone in the field or if someone, somewhere is part of the soundscape. The sound of traffic and construction work from outside might not sound human, but I am aware that it is the sound of humans in action.

My surroundings might be oblivious to the fact that they are now commemorated on a conceptual sound art piece on cassette tape, that I have turned them into material, but I am aware of their impact on the work, and I have been conscious of abstraction and anonymity in my treatment of the material: the only exposed (human) performer is myself. The field would still have been there without these co-creators, but it would have been another field. They were my involuntary collaborators in co-creating this particular field, at this particular time.

## The Field Recordist

I too, am part of the field, an actor in this constructed soundscape. While performing my daily sounds, I was in the dialectic position of performer and recorder, sender and receiver. Aware of the fact that my sounding was being recorded and for what purpose – except for the times when I fell asleep while recording, and ended up sleeping my way through hours of raw material. I was unsure of my own role but I knew I would have final say over the use of the material. I too, was turned into (biased) sonic material. I decided to not try and hide my presence in the work by editing out my sound, but rather acknowledge my part as co-performer, as part of the matter that makes up the field and appreciate that, even when no one is recording, my everyday sounds are part of the shared acoustic space that everyone in this field hears.

It is essentially impossible for a field recordist to delete themselves from the recordings. Even when I leave the recorder to record alone in the room, I still position the recorder and press play – and stop. I decide whether the window is open, I set the recording volume. I decide which parts of the recording to use, and how much to edit the sound. To try and delete my own sound from the field, would have been a more overtly performative action than performing my daily sound for the recorder.

I was not aware of the time that I was employing a diffractive methodology.<sup>1</sup> Listening to and recording the field was a form of material research that changed the way I related to it and expressed myself within it, and reading and writing about my work has changed the way I think about it and given me new words to define my methods with.

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1        Amba Sayal-Bennett, "Diffractive Analysis: Embodied Encounters in Contemporary Artistic Video Practice – Tate Papers," Tate, Spring 2018, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/29/diffractive-analysis>.

## Acoustic Democracy

The shared acoustic space is a non-verbal democracy where everyone make space for each other's sound and find ways to compromise between silence and noise. Previously in my life, I was not very attentive to, or respectful of, this social contract. Finland – and age – has taught me a lot about relational ethics and interpersonal expectations of consideration and self-regulation, and respect for other people's silence is more promoted and protected here than anywhere else I have been. If I had lived illegally in my studio in Copenhagen or Berlin, I reckon I would not have been as quiet as I am here. In those cities my presence is not as loud as it is here, or other people's presence is louder, and I can hide in their noise.

Odland and Auinger call it the Sonic Commons, and reflect in their work and writing on the emotional impact of individual gestures in a shared acoustic environment, regardless of whether an action is intentional or not, and whether or not other people in the environment are aware of it.<sup>2</sup> In her essay, *Silence and the Notion of the Commons*, Ursula Franklin implies a direct correlation between silence and mental health, and emphasises that the space it gives "...is the core of the strength of silence" by "Allowing openness to the unplannable, to the unprogrammed."<sup>3</sup> I would argue that noise has a similar potential, in that it offers a space in which sound is allowed.

Even if we do not see each other, we are aware of each other's presence due to the sound we produce. We can navigate the shared space by listening to ourselves and each other; listening becomes a social act, a socially aware act, an indirect form of interaction and non-verbal communication. We listen, and sound, alone in our own pockets, but our individual listening and sounding become collective actions performed parallelly, and our individual sounds merge with each other and co-create the fabric of the shared acoustic backdrop of our individual performances of (un)planned actions.

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2 Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger, "Reflections on the Sonic Commons," *Leonardo Music Journal* 19 (2009): 63–68, <https://doi.org/10.1162/lmj.2009.19.63>.

3 Ursula Franklin, "Silence and the Notion of the Commons," ed. Laura Buzzard et al., *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, 2016, 439–44.



## Fairy Tales

In my imagination, this tower was always a mythical, local legend in my – I like to think that at the time of its construction, it must have been the tallest building in town. I have no idea if this is true, as I have not done thorough research on its history, partly because most information about it is in Finnish, and partly because it did not feel important to know.

To me, this was a place of dreams and hopes, visions for a bright future and a happy ending. A place I dreamed up and found in a time of need, when I was losing my right to a studio at school and had to consider my priorities and financial limitations, regarding living and working space. I lived in shared student housing, in a small room, and I could not afford my own apartment or the rent of a workspace in addition to my room. I dreamed of a studio with an ocean view where I could work no matter the time of day, a space with the capacity to house me, my rhythms and my songs. I got a studio with ocean sound (imagined or real), where I can work in different ways depending on the time of day.

The tower is a common mythological trope often related to concepts of agency. Things of importance are hidden in towers and people of importance are locked away in towers. Towers give an overview for those in the top, they are structures of control. They keep secrets away from the uninitiated and keep the implicated away from the rest of the world. It takes courage and resourcefulness to conquer them and change the narrative.

The Danish King Christian IV's daughter, Countess Leonora Christina, was imprisoned for treason in Copenhagen Castle's Blue Tower for 22 years in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. She wrote a semi-fictionalised autobiographical account of her captivity *Jammersminde*,<sup>4</sup> now regarded as one of the most important Danish prose works of the century. She was posthumously published and is one of the earliest known female Danish writers.

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4 Leonora Christina Ulfeldt and S. Birket-Smith, *Jammersminde: En Egenhændig Skildring Af Hendes Fangenskab I Blaataarn I Aarene 1663-1685* (Kjøbenhavn, Danmark: Gyldendal, 1869).

The Tower of Babel from Genesis tells a story of people questioning and defying authoritative hierarchy, and in tarot card readings The Tower symbolises chaos and disruption; change of existing structures. Sometimes the evil overlord rules from the magic centre of a tower. Here I sit in my ivory tower, getting lost in the magic realism of my academic research.

Growing up, I read a lot of fantasy novels, an avid fan of the coming-of-age genre-trope of awkward pre-teen discovering magic dualism and embarking on larger-than-life quests. Children's' tales are full of personified non-human subjects, objects coming to live, with personalities and agendas and parts to play in the storyline. Maybe this story-telling tool is so successfully employed because children have an easier time relating to the other, or maybe children tend to project their humanity onto non-human subjects because of all these stories. Perhaps children are just bored or lonely and learn how to entertain themselves by creating stories to live in.

During my years in Finland I have spent a lot of time alone, increasingly so with, but not exclusively due to, the pandemic. It has been very lonely, and I have enjoyed it more than I thought I could. When you live alone, there is no one to regulate reality or enforce norms on your situation. Living in a secret home, a bubble of my own making, defeating the system and creating more than what is offered is a fairy tale in and of itself, an almost impossible, fantastical act of resistance. Nevertheless, on my lone quest I have constructed a pocket of magic realism for myself which would not have come to life within standard arrangements of living and working.

Whatever the psychological grounds are for these displays of imagination and extended empathy, I do not think I ever outgrew my private fairy tale. I am always narrating my own life in my mind, I have been writing my mental biography for decades, and my home is full of tiny plastic animals and figurines, all living their own lives and carrying out individual storylines in my potted plants and across the windowsill. I still look for magic portals in old books and I am not yet convinced I am too old to be the protagonist of a coming-of-age story, I might just have to write it myself.

# THE TAPE

## Tape Technicalities

97 min. Max 200 copies.

Standard ferric tape, tape-casing from recycled plastic in frosty aqua colour, produced in England. Clear plastic cover-case.

J card covers and stickers designed from online templates, laser colour print. 7-panel J cards printed on standard copy paper, cut and folded by hand, stickers printed on blank, pre-cut sticker sheets.

Graphic design: fold-out photo of Meritorni shot in the blue hour, several shades of night and morning available. Photo edited with Photoshop and InDesign. Tape sides are divided in day & night, instead of A & B or 1 & 2, and marked by stickers of the building in night and day colours on each side, without further explanation. Tapes are randomly rewound to either side before distribution. The tape is the first product released under my new, informal, production company Merry Thorny.

## Text on backside of J card:

*There is a tower by the sea. An artist is in a pocket of the tower, works, lives in the tower, is still in the tower. The artist cannot see the sea. The tower is very tall, and can see everything. The tower tells tales of the outside, the artist listens.*

*The tower listens to the people moving around it, outside it, listens to the music they make. In the night, when the tower is silent, the artist sings and the tower listens, sings along. In the night, when the tower is silent, the artist can hear the sea in her pocket.*

*The Silence of Sea Tower is an auto fictional, site-specific sound art piece, painting a sonic portrait of a building and the liminal aural space between its inhabitants. 9 months of recordings, of the silence and noises in the artist's studio, is released on cassette tape. The work situates itself somewhere between ambient noise music, field recording-soundscape and conceptual spatial art, curating an experience of a place and allowing that place to be experienced anywhere the listener brings it.*



Picture above: The Silence of Sea Tower tapes  
Picture below, next page: The Silence of Sea Tower J-card pictures



THE SILENCE OF  
SEA TOWER

A MERRY THORN PRODUCTION  
WRITTEN BY XENIA  
POLANSKI BORN

THE SILENCE OF  
SEA TOWER

A MERRY THORN PRODUCTION  
WRITTEN BY XENIA  
POLANSKI BORN

THE SILENCE OF  
SEA TOWER

A MERRY THORN PRODUCTION  
WRITTEN BY XENIA KAMM  
POLANSKI BORN

THE SILENCE OF  
SEA TOWER

A MERRY THORN PRODUCTION  
WRITTEN BY XENIA KAMM  
POLANSKI BORN

THE SILENCE OF  
SEA TOWER

A MERRY THORN PRODUCTION  
WRITTEN BY XENIA KAMM  
POLANSKI BORN



**Tape Day Side**

Dreamy Intro  
Wilfa  
Coming & Going  
Bialetti  
Bridge (Constructing a Symphony)  
Boom

The Silence of Sea Tower  
By Xenia Ramm

**Tape Night Side**

Sea Breathe  
Rainy  
Hallway Howling  
Electric Light Orchestra  
Venting  
Cylinda  
Mustang

A Merry Thorny Production  
Made in Finland 2023





Blank Tapes

## The Silence of Sea Tower

*Link to SoS mp3:*

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/ui5kng15hg8aof3/AAC9q3o0Vrevo9wZ2JzuMR05a?dl=0>

The digital version of the sound can only be found with the link printed on the inside of the tape's J card, and is meant to support the listener's access to the work after listening rights have been obtained via the tape. For accessibility reasons I have included it here as well.

On the tape, the day side is 49 min. long, the night side is 48 min., though every tape differs slightly in duration because they are all recorded manually and I do not press start and stop with robotic timing. The digital version is shorter, 39 and 40 min. respectively, because there are hidden tracks on both sides of the tape. The extra track on the dayside is the mechanic sound of the tapes being recorded in my studio. On the night side, I have recorded myself singing popular songs about silence, and edited them so only the noise of the recordings remains. Several songs are layered to create a dense, mystique noise. Only the dedicated audience, those listening to the full tape or reading this entire thesis, will get to know the full scope of the work.

## Cassette Concepts

Even on the parts of the tape where there is only complete silence, there is audible noise – one of the things lacking in the digital version of the file. Additionally, the mechanics of the players and the material nature of the tape makes the medium increasingly noisy as it ages, adding an extra time-based rendition to the sound.

It seemed like the perfect medium for this piece. Another way to question the concepts of noise and silence, background and foreground, and paralleling the (un)intentionality of field recording as a method. Tapes have two sides, nicely mirroring the ongoing idea of duality and opposites in this thesis – an idea originating with a shelf dividing my studio into workspace and home, the shelf whereon the first tape recorder lives.

Listening to tapes is no longer common practice, those who possess a tape player either gave it thought or did not discard the past, and I like both of those sentiments. It is a slightly unpractical medium, and rather specific in both sound and aesthetics. You can find old tapes very cheap in thrift stores, if you are content with listening to the selection at hand and not be in full streaming control. Those who use it choose it; you must be willing to compromise to reclaim this outdated medium. Living illegally in an improvised home is not common practice, and it requires a lot of compromise. Not the most practical arrangement, with e.g. no kitchen, and not something that is offered as an option; something you decide to do, and make it work however it is possible. What you get is something specific with its own special aesthetic.

My studio is a secret pocket of the tower, and now I have made the tower pocket-sized so you can put it in your pocket and bring it anywhere you want. The building can travel as far as the listener takes it, and I think it is so curious to consider the wide-spread future displacement implicated. As if I have taken bricks of sound from the building and shared them with the public as pieces of treasure.

## **The Artefact**

The tape is a memento of a moment in time and space: Helsinki, Merihaka, Meritorni, my life, an art education, the concert event where someone procures it. Tape is a way to physically distribute time-based art for later, repeated listening, expanding the duration of the audience experience. The listener must physically engage with the work in order to experience it, making it interactive.

The work has a physical, visual component. The listener can fold out the cover which turns into a small poster of the tower, with informative and poetic text on the backside.

When I was growing up, the physical aspect of audio releases was an integral part of the experience. Pressing buttons to activate the item, polishing the CD or winding up loose tape.

The listener has to flip the tape, not only in the machine but in their hands to figure out which side to play first.

Using the track list on the backside of the cover as menu, keeping track of time, place and progress while listening. Enjoying the visual side of the work while listening. CD cover-inlays as thick as booklets, containing all sort of precious trivia and fan-fodder, lyrics, images, graphic art, sometimes even fold-out posters for the wall. New acquisitions with crisp, blank pages, older specimens with signs of age and consumption, bent corners and confused re-folds of particularly complicated designs, greasy spots from sticky fingers, curled paper from spilled beverages; medals to prove their tried and trusted value.

When sound went digital my listening experience changed. With iTunes and mp3 players, I lost track of which track was on, I just pressed play without looking or reading much. With streaming, the old way of consuming full albums, beginning to end, seemed to get lost in the online vastness; compilations reduced to popular shrapnel and algorithmic selections.

The Silence of Sea Tower is a two-part soundscape, it does not have separate tracks to switch between or listen to as individual parts. However, it does have separate parts overlapping, separate audio events happening at different times. I named the different parts and included an overview of them as a track list on each side of the tape, naming them after the performers of each act or the main events taking

place. This allows the listener to identify some sounds, and it can be read as a score or script. Even though the different parts are not technically separated, and I did not add any time codes, the track list can help the listener navigate the progression of the soundscape. Narrative Noise offers more detailed introductions of performers and events, so the track list on the tape and the performance narration function as call-back cues for each other.

## Ethics of Editing

All sound and silence is recorded with a Tascam DR-40X, without any effects or limiter, and no wind cap. The sound is edited and composed in Adobe Audition, with minimal use of effects. The final bounce is mastered directly onto tape, line-in from DAW to tape recorder via AUX>RCA. Each tape is recorded manually, rendering them unique in the exact timing of rec start/stop.

I have cut, combined, layered and repeated parts of recordings, to emulate how I experience the concept of daily routines and repeated actions. Picking apart the surrounding soundscape, isolating elements and enhancing hidden parts, reconstructing my sonic reality to reflect my inner experience of the outer.

Editing is a performative action, a performative tool in the composition of sound. The sound is prepared for listening, to be performed in some form, as playback on tape or as live performance. Recording is a compositional action, a compositional tool in the performance of sound. Editing is a way to conduct sound and the performers producing them. When I edit the sounds, I essentially time-travel through the material to become a retroactive director on the set of recording. Editing is a form of storytelling, a material tool of narration.

To me, curation is a puzzle: there is at least one right way to put together the elements together, I just need to figure out how the pieces fit together. Composing this soundscape was a way for me to curate this space, using sound as my sculptural material.

After a few months of recording, I told my supervisor Ava Grayson that I had soon recorded all the sounds, and they questioned if that is possible: does a sound ever happen more than once?

### Less is More

Much of this project was an exploration of resistance within myself, friction I have with the world; ambivalence. Time, silence, loneliness. The idea began with the dissonant paradox of silence and noise: highly subjective concepts generally perceived as universal.

A great challenge of mine is mastering appropriate minimalism. Each sound needs to breathe, to sing its own song, space enough to dance. I get impatient, bored, conduct more action. The voices drown each other in a sea of sound, I drown in the silence.

Silence is such a delicate material – noise too, for that matter – and I am afraid I am not yet gentle enough to handle such exquisiteness. I am happy with the result, but sometimes I regret a few things added in a feeble last minute. Less is less is a hard lesson to learn... Maybe one day!

I bought the longest, standard-length tapes I could get, 95 min. (tapes are always a bit longer than what they are sold as, but this is the duration you are guaranteed), because the genre needs time to build and evolve. I did not want the dynamics to feel rushed, and I did not want to sacrifice too many darlings to make the collage work. You can get tapes with longer duration, but Standard tape players might not play them.

### Conducting Silence

I wanted to preserve the ambient acoustics, respect the sound of the space without modifying or transforming it too much, but still approach the work as fiction. I did not want to filter the sound, or tweak it (much), and was conscious of this choice in both recording and editing stages. However, I adjusted gain and volume and compressed as needed, to emphasize subtle notions and shy sounds, and to find and pull out secrets from the background.

I did not use much noise reduction as a method in this project, though some extreme noises have been cut or quieted, when wind or movement have made the recording clip and distort to levels unbearable for head-phone listening. On some recordings I have added an EQ with a subtle hiss-cut, to try and minimise the Tascam's internal noise floor – which at times became dominant when using multiple compressors in a chain and layering amplified tracks. I never attempted to eliminate the recorder, for it is also a performer in this play and since everything is filtered through its body and voice it would be impossible to remove it without removing the sound altogether. I am the writer, Tascam is the narrator: together, we tell the tales of the tower.



## The Neutral Myth

The recordist is conducting the recording, and the recording device is filtering or colouring the sound, all this is a form of editing. Even if one was to not touch the raw recordings, lots of editing choices have been made in the process, and lots of editing has happened already from, or even before, the point of capture. Technically, the idea of neutral, objective field recording is a myth pertaining to a foregone era of field recording, when the method was perceived to be a documentary-practice rather than an artistic medium.

This shift in definition is expressed by several contemporary artists in the field such as Lawrence English, who in his article *Relational Listening: A Politics of Perception*<sup>5</sup> considers the practice's more recent inclusion into the field of sound art as a defining shift and reflects on the act of listening as the creative crux in this transition.

Mark Peter Wright, with whom I took a course this summer about the ethics of field recording, thus with whom I have had great discussions on the topic, has materialised the paradox of the (in)visible field recordist as a non-human alter ego called the Noisy-Nonself, as a humoristic way of highlighting the performative nature of the act.<sup>6</sup>

On SoS, Tascam is one of the performers. Mechanical noise, my touch too close to the microphone, wind distortion, is not eliminated but rather included as audio effects. Cassette tapes are a noisy medium, most players available are even more noisy than their default due to age, dust, wear and tear. The choice of medium is curatorial, the work will keep changing and expanding with unique layers of noise every time it is played.

## Standing Still

With no tripod, I often hold the recorder in my hand, my touch leaving traces on the recordings. My pulse might add an underlying rhythm,

5 Lawrence English, "Relational Listening: A Politics of Perception," *Contemporary Music Review* 36, no. 3 (2017): 127–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2017.1395141>.

6 Mark Peter Wright, "The Noisy-Nonself: Towards A Monstrous Practice of More-Than-Human Listening," *Evental Aesthetics* Vol. 6 No. 1 (2017) *Sound Art and Environment*, 2017, [https://eventalaesthetics.net/Back\\_Issues/V6N1\\_2017/EAV6N1\\_2017\\_Wright\\_NoisyNonself\\_24\\_42.pdf](https://eventalaesthetics.net/Back_Issues/V6N1_2017/EAV6N1_2017_Wright_NoisyNonself_24_42.pdf).

unnoticed beats of life.

Sounds appear suddenly, and seem to disappear faster than they came. I keep my recorder on a shelf next to my bed, so I can reach it in a single movement. It takes six seconds to turn on; six seconds in which a sound can begin and end countless times. Often, a moment passes before I can capture it. If I am lucky, a lost sound returns immediately, sometimes much later, perhaps never again. When I give up and turn the recorder off, it usually comes again – sound is such a tease.

Recorder in hand, standing still, realising that my pants are made from noisy, 80s-tracksuit synthetics. I breathe as quietly as I can without holding my breath, arm stretched towards the window. Patience. It is in my nature to drop everything for a sudden event taking precedence, I enjoy acting on impulse. It is not in my nature to stand still and wait for something.

The sun goes down, while I wait for the low rumble of a concrete drill from the construction outside. A long wait, no drill, but a lot of other, quiet sounds emerge in my patience. The ticking of the wall clock I recently bought, not on the wall but left on a shelf, I do not like this clock with its incessant ticking. The metal in my oven clicking as it cools down. Clicking and ticking from within the walls. Talking neighbours in mumbled languages I do not understand. My stomach makes a small rumble.

I stand so still I become part of the building, a static fixture whose sound can only be heard by those who are very quiet themselves, those who listen. I look out the window and see a house that I have never noticed before.

Fourteen minutes of standing still before I sit down to write this text. I caught a bit of drilling in between the ticking silence. While I write, the drill hammers back into the concrete, but as I reach for the recorder it stops again. I sit still, wait. I get a long, intense drilling sound. It was all worth it.



**The Silence of Sea Tower Composition, Night**  
Adobe Audition screenshot

Editor: Day.sesx Mixer

hms 5:00 10:00 15:00 20:00 25:00 30:00 35:00 40:00 45:00 50

Track 1: M S R I

Track 2: M S R I

Track 3: M S R I

Track 4: M S R I

Track 5: M S R I

Track 6: M S R I

Track 7: M S R I

Track 8: M S R I

Track 9: M S R I

Track 10: M S R I

Track 11: M S R I

Track 12: M S R I

The Silence of Sea Tower Composition, Day  
Adobe Audition screenshot

## Routine Time Travel

To me, repeated actions and sounds, can feel like a thousand instances experienced in a single moment. Sometimes I am not sure if a routine is anything but a singular moment feeling as a stretch of time, deceiving me to believe it is separate occasions with minor deviations that I could easily be imagining. I often confuse these separate instances with each other, their similarities playing tricks on my memory. It does not seem important to know which event happened when, if they were seemingly the same.

When I listen to the past year of my life, repeated sounds do not seem to care if they are mixed up and mistaken for each other. I can navigate the time of day, and the time of year, when I listen beyond a focal sound and out into the soundscape: Autumn storms threatening to wash away the city; sea gulls raising children in Spring; the tower by day and night.

Making coffee always sounds the same, though sometimes Bialetti takes longer to warm up and sometimes has more to say. Sometimes I cannot remember how many times in a day we have talked, when days run long with this work. Sometimes I cannot remember how many times the day and night have swapped places, when the work runs so long that I take scattered naps instead of going to bed.

## Material Agency

One of the first sound art pieces I remember being presented for was also one of the first works where I fully grasped the idea of conceptual and site-specific art: Jacob Kirkegaard's *AION*,<sup>7</sup> where the silence of Chernobyl is played back into itself in a feedback loop. Jacob often records the "wordless voice"<sup>8</sup> of things, and listens to buildings and structures, to figure out what they have to say.

Some recordings run their full length, respecting the actual time of actions such as brewing coffee or boiling water, respecting the performers' own pace and style. They set the progressive frame for a layered reality, for separate moments to crosscut and merge into an indecipherable static progression. I used recordings like that as the bones when composing parts of the total composition body. Limbs were combined into the greater progression, with odd sounds or shorter durations in between, e.g. a rhythmic bridge section of doors opening and closing down the hallway; footsteps coming and going – not to be confused with the longer section of construction sounds, building a new pedestrian bridge across the road outside.

Some recordings are cut into small pieces, used as bricks to stabilise the construction or patches to cover holes in the walls. Tail whips wiggling here and there.

I wanted to use the composition as a method to convey my relationship with time, routine, the dynamics of a circular circadian rhythm with no beginning or end. The space becomes a conceptual sonic experience, rather than a place of logic order of events. Reality blurs, loops, I cut through the boundaries of recorded time and rearrange history. Editing is the tool I use to convey my experience of time and place, by composing reality into a compact experience curated by my ears and filtered through my mind.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacob Kirkegaard - *Aion (Church)*, *Aion* (Fonik Works, 2018), <https://fonik.dk/works/aion.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Roxanne Bagheshirin Lærkesen, *Jacob Kirkegaard: When I Listen I Have to Be Quiet*, *Vimeo* (Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2021), <https://vimeo.com/600950150>.

This was my first attempt at composing a larger soundscape. I have worked with sound on-and-off for many years, in many ways, but I have never really produced my own sound or composed anything as such, and this was my first ever audio release.

Utilising found rhythms and accidental melodies, I worked with natural occurrences of musicality in the recordings – field recording yields fortunate happenstance. When compressing airy sounds, drafts of wind through window cracks and the near-yet-far surge of ventilation systems, hidden harmonies and overtones appeared, forming a choir of intense excitement; such strong emotions hidden so well between the walls in the concrete maze.

For many years I recorded field recordings on my phone, aimlessly creating a vast archive that I have been digging into for numerous projects. Previously I have mainly used them in their documentary capacity without much editing, often as displaced material without much consideration to the implications of that.

.My lack of experience allowed space in this process for the material to guide me. Recording the same place continuously, without a fully formed plan for which sounds I wanted or why, gave the field time to open it itself to me and show me one detail at a time. I learned about the sounds I recorded and what they meant to me and the site, while actively engaging with them. This honed knowledge informed later stages of editing and composition.

Intuitively, I felt that some sounds belonged together,. Some everyday actions are correlated, and some compositions are shaped by spatial layout or functionality. Some of the greater order became clear during recording, the rest fell into place in the editing process. Many sounds surprised me when in later stages. I made them collaborate with others and challenged them. Some sounds did not agree with my plans; some had hidden talents. Some did not like each other; some instantly clicked; love at first sound, and refused to be separated after meeting. The sounds have personality and temper, some are more outspoken than others, some are shy. When I listen carefully, they tell me their secrets. When I sing to them, they dance in my ears.

A conversation between me and the sound, between different pieces of sound. An ongoing negotiation between vision, opinion, and material willingness. Together, we eventually agreed on a collective choreography.

## Narrative Noise

### Noisy Narrative

The live iteration of SoS is titled Narrative Noise, the title came to me after going to bed, before falling asleep. I am a sucker for attractive word puns and will gladly develop projects from the base of a good title. I did not know that this project needed narration, and I am still not convinced it does, but that is what the title suggested, and I went with it.

The haunting, noisy narrative. The naïve idea that a story must follow a linear progression, that characters and places must be introduced for us to meet them; that we need to know who and why they are, to know them. At times I question the added verbal layer in this piece.

The sounds in the tower tell me stories, about my neighbours and the surroundings, all the parallel storylines happening as layers in the soundscape. My sounds tell stories about me.

The verbal score does not minutely mirror the soundscape, and it is not an attempt to verbalise the audio piece in its entirety. NN expands the universe of SoS, extending the imagination further into a magical realm of the represented reality. The field is explained from an anthropomorphic perspective, detailing the layout of the tower and the sonic relationships within the building, by naming and characterising non-human performers and placing them in the site and story.

A personification of the tower, with a fantastic, humorous tone, allows for another reading (listening) of SoS than the tape offers on its own. As I step onto the stage with the other concert performers (tape players) and set the fairy-tale tone of the event with my narration, I expand not only my own role in the project, but also the suggested position of the audience.

NN verbalises the non-verbal soundscape of SoS, using the score (track list) from the tape as narrative structure, following the order of sounds on the tape. The listener decides the listening order of the tape themselves; the composition is constructed to function as a circular experience with no beginning or end. However, for live performance purposes, a beginning and end is a necessity. I flip a tape, like a coin, to decide where to start. I have written two scripts, one for each outcome, they contain the same text, but the structure is adapted to deliver the info in a sensible order.



The Silence of Sea Tower Release Party Poster



**The Silence of Sea Tower Release Party, Narrative Noise Performance**  
in Vapaan Taiteen Tila, photos by Verner Salonen



## **Narrative Score**

(Night > Day)

### *Night*

*There is a tower by the sea. The tower is very tall, and has so many pockets they cannot be counted. An artist is in a pocket of the tower, works, lives in the tower, is still in the tower. The artist is in the bottom of the tower and cannot see the sea.*

*The tower can see everything. The tower tells stories about the sea, tells what it can see. The artist listens. The tower breathes wind from the sea through the walls, around the building, touching the skin of the artist. In the night, when the tower is silent, the artist can hear the sea in her pocket.*

### *Sea Breathe > Rainy > Hallway Howling*

*The tower is always busy, even when it seems like it is not. There are so many who live there, who all have their own ways. Tube choirs and heavy breathers, hallway howlers and bathroom whistlers. The Electric Light Orchestra runs energetically up and down the hallways, buzzing with gossip from all over the tall maze. In the bathroom someone is always venting about something, and someone is always trying to comfort them with soothing sounds.*

### *Electric Light Orchestra > Venting*

*Right when everyone in the house have calmed down, and quietly together agreed to call it a day before the day begins, and the tower is finally, for once, completely still... Then Cylinda decides to serenade them with a song – and the song is loud and clear in the dark silence, so everyone get to enjoy it! But is is okay, because Cylinda does sing very beautiful songs.*

### *Cylinda*

*Mustang is very chatty, has a lot to say about everything. The artist and Mustang get along very well. They have lengthy, nourishing conversations, and it is always ready for a chat no matter what the hour.*

*But when Mustang gets going, the conversation does too. It never*

*realises that the artist has left the conversation and turned her attention to something else, it just keeps jabbing on no matter how small the topic. Social cues are not its strong side, but it has such a warm presence, and it would not feel like a home without it.*

### *Mustang*

### *Day*

*The tower listens to the people in its pockets. They move rhythmically, make each their own music. The tower hums along with the rhythm of the people, but they do not hear it.*

### *Dreamy Intro*

*The artist has several roommates. They have each their personality and temperament. The artist talks with them all in different ways. Wilfa is very polite, speaks only when spoken to. Has a strong voice, makes itself heard clearly but concisely. Never seems to need to say more than what is needed. The artist has many small conversations with Wilfa throughout the day.*

*Bialetti seems very shy, takes a while to heat up to the conversation, but is very feisty once you get it going. In fact, Bialetti has very strong opinions, and will shout them loud when it's all fired up. The artist doesn't mind, she finds these discussions very stimulating. But she does not engage too often; Bialetti needs time to cool off between rants, or it boils over.*

### *Wilfa > morning sounds > Bialetti*

*There are also people outside of the tower, talking, moving, making music. The tower listens to the people outside. Someone opens a window, the tower lets the song from outside fill its pockets, lets everyone inside sing along.*

### *Construction Symphony > Boom*



## **Live Setting**

The Silence of Sea Tower release party with Narrative Noise performance concert, 31.5.23 19-22 in Vapaan Taiteen Tila.

Multiple tape players spread out on the floor in an undefined stage area, all sound from built-in speakers, verbal narration without amplification. Seating arrangement with chairs, carpets and pillows for audience.

Organising my own graduation event, with no addition exhibition budget, I had to be realistic and make some pragmatic decisions regarding venue and concert setup.

Vapaan Taiteen Tila has challenging acoustics, especially since I did not mic up anything to larger speakers, but it was the only suitable space I could use for free. I had help from friends setting up the space for the audience, and I did pay a friend to do photo documentation, but I did not have budget to also hire a sound technician.

Due to time pressure and photo lighting I did not change the ambient light of the space, so the room was fully lit from the ceiling tube lights.

## **Performance Pancakes**

Performing a new project is like making pancakes: the first one might be precious, but it is likely not the best. You need to warm up, or you might be too warm from nerves and excitement, and you cannot find the right balance of things and sounds before you try them out in physical spaces and experience duration with a live audience. For future concerts, there are several things I will be more focused on and experiment with, to gradually finetune this project's live format.

When performing the work, I deconstruct and reconstruct the composition live. Every performance offers a new composition from the same material, following the same structure but allowing for flexibility and renewal in timing and layering. For future concerts, I might play around with stretching the composition to give more space to the individual parts and to extend the duration.

The tape players add their individual voices to the mix, and they might get to sing different parts of the harmony each time. Every space I perform in offers its own acoustics and character.

Some of my tape players are so small and old that their speakers could not compete with the vast acoustic space in VTT. I am planning on bouncing longer tracks for these players and let them stagedive and crowd surf around the audience, passed from hand to hand, ear to ear, so the listener can have more intimate meetings with the most shy, quiet performers and parts of the soundscape can circulate and change the direction of sound; a moving composition. These machines, and their aesthetic marvel, is best appreciated up close. Audience interaction and the element of unpredictability – anything out of my control – offers the potential of surprise, even for me.

In retrospect, the concert could have been longer. The dynamic build-up could have easily been stretched out, playing around with patience and anticipation. The laced collage of sound layers, from cassette players and separate audio tracks, would have benefitted from each element given more time and space. It can be hard to make out the totality of a choir, if you do not know how the different voices sound as soloists.

It is important to give space to the sounds and let them speak for themselves. There is time, if I decide so. The silence is only noisy if I allow it to be so, it takes time and space for this to happen. If the

audience was standing, I would be conscious of their comfortability regarding duration, but if they were sitting down I think I could play approximately the full length of the piece without anyone getting restless.

The verbal narration would benefit from some kind of amplification, but I would prefer not to connect the setup to external systems and make do with the cassette players' built-in mics and speakers if possible. I have not yet figured out how, but I would love to filter my voice through one of these old machines, to merge myself with the other performers. Most of these old, integrated mics work as great effect filters, often with distinct compression and a noisy touch of dusty mechanics. The exact timing and quantity of speaking is one of the things I need to test and tweak for each performance. Verbalising the narrative adds another type of presence that I find interesting in the live setting, but I am not yet sure how to apply this extra dimension without it feeling slightly forced or foreign to the work. Simultaneously conducting and performing is an odd, ambiguous position to embody. Narrating a non-verbal story, putting it into words out loud, is an ambivalent endeavour.

Even though the subtle hum of VTT's tube lights might have been an appropriate ambient noise addition, I do think I would prefer to perform with more cosy lighting. The sonic immersion is somehow not as fluid when everyone is so brightly lit, and I think the inner visuals of the narrative might benefit from some mysterious shadows and a setting dim enough that the inner eyes can relax.

Conceptually I like the idea of presenting the sound of one pocket, a secret art space, in other art pockets. Venues that are not easy to find, for which you must be initiated to know of, places of flourishing culture out of sight from the oblivious public sphere. Places that exist for and with the art; those who make it and those who love it.

VTT is underground, a nice contrast to the story of a tower, and you can walk right past outside without knowing the wonders going on inside. Akusmata, the venue of the 2<sup>nd</sup> concert iteration, is another pocket-venue, also underground and artist-run by Petri Kuljuntausta.

## Release Party Posters in Bathroom



### PR Noise

The release event was advertised online and with printed poster and flyers in Helsinki. Some posters placed in hidden places, such as the backside of elevator doors and in toilet cubicles.

Graphic design: photo of stacked tape players forming a tower, with a sea of cassette tapes breaking waves around the tower, on a background of saturated sunrise colours. The sunrise is a stock photo, the rest of the photos I took myself. Poster edited with Photoshop and InDesign.



**Release Party Poster in Elevator**



**Promo shot**  
photo by Hugo Murtoniemi

# THE THESIS

## Binary Opposition

Silence and noise, inside my studio and outside of my studio, inside the building and outside the building, day and night, workspace and private space. Me and the others, people and the machines, silence and noise. So many perceived binary opposites, so much contrast confusion.

Are they real? The silence is noisy, my night overlaps with the others' day, my workspace and private space bleed into each other in every way. Sound travels between in and out, between my space and other spaces, disregarding any clear lines of division. Sound does not easily let itself contain to this simplistic idea of space. Soundwaves travel in all directions, through matter, reflects, bounces, change direction. It takes careful, considerate work to control sound, to contain it.

What happens in the liminal space between perceived opposites? A liminal space is a place of transition, it holds potential of change for that which overlaps. It is a passive space, yet full of action: indirect, unintentional action. Transitional, consequential acoustic events.

## Silence

I am a loud person, always was, I speak more than I listen, act before I observe. My silence is rarely quiet, and it always a noisy phenomenon in my ears; my mind is loud when there is no external sound to drown it. Silence is more prevalent when I am alone, but it can be loudest with other people. I used to think that if I just kept uttering sound, words, then the silence would not be able to find its way in; leave no gap for the gaping void, or it might swallow you whole.

When I moved to Finland, the silence overwhelmed me. The noise of the silence – bad acoustics, social anxiety, self-reflection, sensory stimulus, emotions – was suppressive and I had my first-ever social anxiety attack in Lidl. In Finland, I have formed a habit of speaking to myself out loud.

I have visited several anechoic chambers, but the first time I went on a cabin trip to Lapland in the winter was my first experience of feeling true silence, and the first time I truly experienced silence as a positive hiatus. After a few days, the city finally ran out in my ears, the noise faded away. After a few years I finally learned how to be silent. I used to think that talking, sounding, was a form of listening, now I know that to fully listen I must be quiet.

The tower is not a silent place, the silent time of the tower is full of sound – noisy sound, silent noise, sounds that are always present which you do not hear when more predominant sounds dominate the soundscape. When the streets are empty and quiet, the seagulls appear louder. When the gulls are sleeping, my mechanic roommates are still awake. The building never stops breathing, the tower never ceases whispering.

The silence of the tower is full of music and stories, rhythms and hidden narratives, I can hear it when I listen; when I am silent.

## Noise

Throughout this project, I tried to define what noise means. It is context-based: what is unwanted in one situation might be desired at another time; what is tolerable in one setting might be excruciating in another, it is highly subjective. Sociocultural norms imply general definitions, and set standards for acceptable range. Time is a decisive factor, regarding time of day/year as well as duration.

The same sounds appear in my everyday soundscape and in my work, but they turn into something else. Noise is not as noisy when performed for an audience who are expecting it. When my ears are prepared for something loud or unpleasant, they adapt in anticipation and my mind adjusts the bar for what is sensorily acceptable. Choosing the unwanted changes its nature, by changing my relationship to it.

If I am on a longer trip to a shopping mall, visiting many shops, getting tired and hungry and overwhelmed with people and pop music and things, the soundscape can be anxiety inducing and ever so loud. When I go to a techno rave in an old power plant, with towers of speakers blasting so loud the concrete walls are bouncing, hundreds of people dancing around me, lit up by lasers and flashing strobe lighting, I put in my earplugs and my feet begin to meditate. It has to do with me, my capacity, and it has to do with my control of the situation. Mentally, noise can be a lack of overview or inability to focus, overstimulation; a feeling of chaos or loss of control. While editing and composing, conversely, are processes of control, overview and direction.

When working with sound, noise is generally considered anything other than the signal you are aiming to record. Anything else appearing on the recording becomes part of it; changes it. Reflecting on this fact, I wondered what would be considered noise if the signal I was trying to record was the noise of a place, and if the noise floor of my recorder was an authentic part of the place or something I added to it. Working with tape and old tape players, I knew that several machines would add noise to my sound before it was heard by the listener.

Noise is somewhat of a background phenomenon. When working with field recording, the concept of background and foreground is different than when recording a clean signal in a sound studio.

If I decidedly record a noise, it transforms into the main signal and is no longer considered a noise in that it is no longer unwanted. That which is in the background, what I did not attempt to record, turns into the noise of that recording, but when I pull out those sounds in the editing, and give them a role in the composition, they transform as well..

Giving a sound my full attention pulls it out of the many-layered soundscape and brings it to the foreground of my hearing, even if it is not the loudest sound present. Paying attention to the noise changes its character and the way it feels in my ears. Editing can enhance this further e.g., with the use of compressors, some sounds are so subtle I do not realise they are there before I listen in headphones and begin adjusting the gain.

SoS is the choice of noise, claiming the background as my own and turning it into the foreground for everyone else to hear.

## **Sound Affects**

Recording sounds makes me listen to them in a different way than when they are just part of the soundscape, recording the soundscape also changes the way I listen to the soundscape, breaking it into separate fragments with each their story to tell. Recording a sound gives it a function; it gives me a function as listener of that sound. The action of recording is simultaneously passive and active, I must be quiet and still to get a clean recording, but I have to actively decide to press record and point the recorder, I have to perform active listening in order to really hear the sound. It is an ambiguous position of performative spectatorship, allowing me to produce and consume simultaneously.

Not only does the decisive act of choosing the noise change my relationship to it, the enduring aspect of relation to something, engaging with it, changes my feelings about it as well. It does not always have to do with my capacity, or whether I am in control of the situation, merely spending time with something, a noise, my relationship to that thing is bound to change or evolve. Maybe the relationship becomes more intimate, or I get used to it; foreign becomes familiar. This relationship might be temporary, relying on an active engagement, or it might be transformed for eternity. The decisive act of engagement is already a choice of relation.

I began this work immediately when moving in so my relationship to this place and my mechanical roommates has developed within the frame of this project. If I had not been recording, I might not have listened as much or in the same way, and my surroundings might not have revealed themselves to me in the same way.

The action of recording something changes the way I perceive it, the way I value or evaluate it. Recording a sound for a specific purpose, such as SoS, makes me choose or value it from a specific premise or standpoint, and I might not have recorded, or even heard, the same sounds had I not had a specific context or purpose in mind when encountering them. Even if a sound is not used in the end, I still related to it with purpose, gave it a momentary function.

The noises in my studio, on SoS, are my noises, I chose them. We have a personal and professional relationship. They have a purpose.

## Inside | Outside

The pocket gets excruciatingly hot and choking in the summer sun, I sleep with the window open. The sound of the construction work outside makes its way into my dreams, I conduct and compose it, constructing my sound piece once yet again. The project is over, the tape is out, my brain has not fully realised it yet.

The inside gets loud, disturbed, when the window is open. The construction, the street, traffic, it is aggressive compared to my indoor serenity. When I close the window, the noise-floor of my reality becomes so low, I can hear the silence in the building. I can hear the other pockets through the walls.

Sometimes, the outside noise feels comforting, if it accompanies me in the right time. The other pockets can hear me through the walls. Letting the outside in can feel like camouflage. My noise blending with that of the surrounding world, hiding me from the other insides, drowning my existence in unaware ongoings, construction workers drilling holes in the street to make space for a new bridge. The outside noise becomes my inside silence. I do not know if this is real, if I am truly hidden, but even imagined camouflage makes me feel safe.

The outside spills inside in many ways and forms: rain, snow, leaves, pollen, seeds. The smoke from someone's cigarette, weed, the smell of Indian food. I have had visits from a big wasp and a small bird – not at the same time. Not everyone or everything bothers with human ideas of borders and appropriate placement. The sun does not even care about the barricade of window glass. Sound is partially blocked by the closed window, diminished but not defeated.

Everything is molecules, atoms, crashing together, bonding, changing, moving on. What feels empty is full, and what feels full is no more so. The perception of empty space, of void, is false and only serves to allow us to distinguish ourselves from that around us. It allows us to feel separated though we are not, as my camouflage construction allows me to feel hidden.

The borders between us are more real when we perceive them as such.

## Music | Sound Art

SoS is a compact format. Though site-specific in nature, it is inherently a travelling artwork. Not only moving in the pockets of those who buy it and bring it home, and wherever time takes it later if those people part with it, but it also a roadshow that I can pack up and present wherever I think it might be appropriate or interesting. Given that Narrative Noise is not dependent on access to electrical outlets, and the fact that I can up- or downscale the tape player orchestra as needed, it is a highly mobile concert setup. I wanted to make a work that I could share with my audience back home as well.

It is a sculptural setup, beautiful in and of itself, and it could even function as a static installation activated for a live audience.

Sitting down to listen to a tape is a different way to approach a piece of sound than most common, digital solutions. SoS does not expect the listener to enjoy it in a specific way, as a specific genre, but the format does require a certain approach and some level of consideration. Entering the gallery space, we enter also a special space in ourselves as audiences. Sound offers a similar kind of door, allowing us to put on headphones and access different sides of ourselves, immerse our mind, wherever we are.

This work can be enjoyed as a background soundscape, mixing with the immediate circumstances, or it can be approached with full focus and dedicated time for full immersion.

As a performance piece, Narrative Noise can be presented as part of musical programmes, leaning on niche genres such as ambient and noise music. However, the verbal narration, and the style of the anthropomorphic fairy tale, breaks with the convention of these genres, which commonly consists of unbroken soundscapes, built up and sculpted as a live creation, often with a rather serious demeanour. Besides expanding the universe and offering background information on the making of SoS, the storytelling adds a layer of humour to the work, inviting the listener to experience it from a different position – bringing my human voice into the piece is a way for me to reach out a human hand to the audience.



## Silent Methods

I did not seek out the tower in order to make art of it, the project came to me on its own after I happened to find myself here. I was in a good habitual rhythm of listening when I entered the site, having attended an intensive listening workshop shortly before moving into the tower, and the process began almost immediately; automatically – though it took me a while to realise that it was already set in motion, so my earliest listening in this space is not recorded.

I did not practice specific listening exercises in the tower or approach the tower with targeted or methodical ideas of listening, but in retrospect, I have moved through different modes of listening in this space and the changes in my ways of listening have partly been informed by this project while simultaneously informing decisions within the project.

The rhythmic, repetitive premise of everyday life offered its own kind of listening research.

In the early stages I experienced this new soundscape as an entire universe of sound, overwhelming and curious and full of layers I could not differentiate from each other yet. New, particular or persistent sounds stood out and caught my attention, like the tube lighting or my new fridge, much more so than the mere volume of e.g. the construction work.

I have identified my own listening at different times, to fit with Pierre Scaeffers' definitions of *écouter*, *comprendre* and *entendre*, and Michel Chion's ideas of causal, semantic and reduced listening, as presented in a lecture on sound and sculpture by Ava Grayson last winter.<sup>9</sup>

The terms are hard to separate completely, as different ways of listening usually happen in correlation, hence the grouped listing here.

The most noticeable shift was moving between listening to my surroundings as an actual site with its natural soundscape, and as an archive of sound material. The sounds create different meaning, and I create different meaning for and with them, depending on my intention of listening. With the help of this project, and my exponential

9 Ava Imogen Grayson, "Considering the Sonic Object," *K-KM34\_K23B SOUND & SCULPTURE* (lecture, Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki, February 28, 2023).

awareness of concepts of listening, I have reclaimed not only my sounding in this place, but my listening too. Recording, getting to know the detailed rhythms of the area, the sound of the tower breathing and living, the sound of the neighbourhood at all hours, learning the ins and outs of the ordinary, gave me some reassurance and allowed me to reposition myself in the site. Treating the sounds of the space as building blocks for my work, appreciating them for their aesthetic qualities and listening to them as acoustic material rather than evidence of events, removed the threatening aspects that had been glooming in my ears. Once again, I could hear the sounds as the unique wonders they were, roaming free from the activities causing them.

### Feedback

In this thesis, I use the word feedback many times, but never to describe an actual audio feedback. That is not a technique I used in this project, and it is not a sound you will hear in the work. I use the word feedback in a conceptual capacity, to describe what happens between me and the space, me and the material, when everything keeps circulating and I lose track of where effect and affect begins and ends.

Editing, treating the sounds of the place as viscous, sculptural material, rather than mere consequential results of actions and events, was a way for me to take control of my surroundings. The events that occurred that night during my first week had nothing to do with me, and to my knowledge there has been no issues with my own sounding. To take control of something so ephemeral as the soundscape, was a very cathartic way of working with my fear of the invisible.

Sounds can change when you get used to them, and again when you get to know their source. They can change when you record them and play them back, separated from their source, and even more so when you cut them up and rearrange them. After listening to my composition many times, I got used to the new version of the sounds, and they became familiar; for the first and second time altogether. I meet this place many times, in many ways, and the place meets me. We keep finding new ways to sound together.

All stages of the process inform each other; all phases of the work overlap and intertwine. When I listen, I record and compose, when

I record, I listen and compose, when I compose, I listen and record, when I perform, I listen and record. Sometimes I do the work in my mind; pre-recording while listening, pre-composing while recording, pre-performing while composing.

I listen to the same sounds in all stages of the process, in different ways and with slightly different purpose. I listen to all the sounds in many ways, many times.

Listening < > Recording

Relistening < > Composing

Re-recording < > relistening

Performing < > Recomposing

All the sounds are recorded several times: first on my Tascam, then onto tape, then back into the Tascam when I document the live concert sound. From analogue to digital to analogue to digital.

Ambient > Tascam > computer > tape-recorder > tape > tape-player > Tascam > computer

The sounds are played back into the space several times in the process, when listening to initial recordings, while composing, when listening to the sound recorded on tape, when practicing performances. The source meets itself in many ways, many times.

### **Listening to Myself**

My sounds are part of the soundscape I live in; I passively co-create it merely by being in it. The tower hears me, my neighbours hear me, and I hear myself. In extension, I am aware of my own performativity and how it pertains to me in this space; this project.

My voice sounds different from outside my ear, it takes time to get used to. Listening to yourself sleeping, snoring, is weird. Listening to yourself sleeping, and on the same recording clearly hearing the neighbour's door open and close, other neighbours move a table, is a slightly angst-provoking proof of how thin the walls are. Others might hear me as well as I hear them, and when I do not hear myself, I am not in control of my own sounding.

Witnessing one's own performative presence is an odd endeavour, but through dedicated endurance the practice can become cathartic and self-healing. Whether I am hosting my podcast, singing karaoke,

looking at myself in the mirror while dancing, or listening back to recordings of me performing my everyday sounds, I am aware of my own flawed humanity and the realness of it all. Performance and documentary become interconnected structures giving and receiving space via mutual support.

Accepting myself as a part of my recorded soundscape helped me accept myself as part of the shared sound space of the tower. The longer I live here – without being found out and kicked out – and the more I acknowledge my sounding place in the tower and on the tape, the more relaxed I find myself in my daily motions. I no longer tiptoe as carefully as I used to; I no longer colour-code sounds in my mind; I give myself more leeway in my circadian rhythm.

Listening to myself as sonic material, rather than human protagonist, I blend in and out of the foreground as a performer on the recordings, sometimes I cannot find myself in the mass, I cannot always discern myself from machines. Editing the sound of my life for the composition, treating myself as sculptural material, is a new way for me to direct myself as performer; a new way of listening to myself.

While writing this thesis, I interviewed myself twice about the process for my podcast *Verbal Art*.<sup>10 11</sup> One interview was conducted in the daytime, one in the middle of the night, both in my studio and recorded with my Tascam. I edited together parts of the two interviews, to create a conversation between day-me and night-me. In total I recorded myself for five hours and turned it into two podcast episodes of a total of three hours.

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10 Xenia Ramm, "30: Xenia Ramm / Me, Myself & Our Thesis (Pt.1): Verbal Art," Acast, August 16, 2023, <https://shows.acast.com/verbal-art/episodes/30-xenia-ramm-pt1>.

11 Xenia Ramm, "31: Xenia Ramm / Me, Myself & Our Thesis (Pt.2): Verbal Art," Acast, August 23, 2023, <https://shows.acast.com/verbal-art/episodes/31-xenia-ramm-pt2>.

## Constructing Time

Time has always been an abstract concept for me. I am always late, because I rarely feel time in the same pace as the clock suggests. I am very optimistic about what can be achieved within a given timeframe. Sometimes time seems to stretch endlessly, especially at night when the world is quiet, and it feels like the time is mine alone. I love that, when I am in a bubble of eternity; a vacuum in which time stands still and everything is possible. Often time eludes me, it tends to disappear when I need it the most.

Time is not linear, and I never felt it as such. It is a viscous, illusory thing, a construct akin to Frankenstein's monster; my greatest nemesis.

The concept of a routine has always seemed strange to me, even angst provoking, the thought of being trapped in a loop like Groundhog Day. Repetition as a method is a skill I have acquired with time, learning to experience routines as steady beats and rhythms rather than restraining scores.

The composition of SoS exemplifies, and highlights, the current routines of my life. By overdubbing the same actions on multiple occasions, a distorted synergy of repeated events makes you question time, but never place. These days, my life is a compilation of routines, a microcosmos of uneventful happenings, passive activity. People go to their offices and leave again, cars pass by in the street, construction workers keep working on a bridge that does not sound like it will ever be done.

Every (in)action has its own sound effect. Every time of day has its own soundscape. The sounds overlap, bleed into each other's space and time, layering the spatiality around me; what I see and what I cannot see, everything in my vicinity.

From a story-telling perspective, anti-narrative feels like a good way to describe routine. What is it, in this story, that does not drive the plot forward, that does not have any real function – except for worldbuilding and characterisation; the aural backdrop of my life. What happens when nothing happens. The routine, the things that are repeated so many times they lose their meaning.

The stillness of silence, the ambivalence of unintentional noise; the events so subtle you are unsure if they are happening or not, or if they

can be described as such. The inanimate voices of static fixtures, living a mechanical, automated life. The sounds people make, that they do not make for anyone. The sounds that spill between spaces, revealing hidden action, allowing you to indirectly witness events that you are not invited to, the acoustic proof of life in the building.

Contained within 19 square meters, my life is compact. I get up, open a window, open the blinds, boil water, go to the bathroom, take vitamins, make coffee, work, make something to eat, brush my teeth, work, close the window, go out, come home, open the window, boil water, work, make something to eat, make coffee, go to the bathroom, work, close the blinds, make something to eat, brush my teeth, go to bed. Living and working in the same room, I rarely need to move far to be in the right place.

The fundamental routine repeats itself sporadically throughout the day and night, pretending to uphold a vital structure in order to manifest its own existential grounds.

The fundamental routine is the beat of the day, steady beat pounding on. Boil water, fill glass, drink, pee, repeat. Open a door, close a door. Wake up, go to bed; stand up, lie down. Lights on, off, on, off. Blinds open, close, open, close. The routine does not care what time it is, it continues forward in its circular existence unless I pull the brakes. Sometimes I just stay in bed. Sometimes I stay awake.

Working with the sound of the place, transforming circumstance into material and reconstructing my routine, has been an interesting way to investigate myself as a being in time. My life is not linear, and even though I have recorded sound in this space for nine months it might as well just have been one day. My life here is but a moment, and because most of it is spent alone in this tiny bubble, sometimes I wonder if it happened at all.

However, listening back to the sound of my life has helped me realise how the routine changes over time, how it stays the same. The rhythm gradually evolves, with the change of seasons and from a slow, general progression of states and affairs. My rhythm morphs as I change, but it happens so quietly that I do not notice. The natural composition of the sound of my life mimics compositional structures of ambient noise as a genre, or maybe vice versa.

Saving events outside their natural time, removing them from their source event and playing them back in any order, at any time, feels like challenging time. Reminiscent of how reality feels in the early blue hours of the day, when I have skipped a night and gained a lifetime; when I am one up on time, having won the last round.

Recording sound is a way to capture time and make it stop; a moment can last forever and be experienced again and again. Recording sound, a moment, is one way to defy time, to disrupt and change the linear progression of narrative. Redistributing recordings and performing them turns my personal act of defiance into a shared, collective revolt.

Playing the sounds of the space back into the space acts as a distorted sound mirror, conducting time and rearranging the routine symmetry. Playing the sound of the day for the night, which otherwise would never get to experience the hustling and bustling of daytime such as the construction symphony, I facilitate meetings and interaction otherwise impossible.

Neighbours, who do not share a wall, blend into each other's acoustic space in my composition, my studio acting as a hosting membrane. Many more meals at one time, than the small, electric oven would ever be able to handle. I let the fridge sing along with a choir of itself, Cylinda's great harmony.

### **Personal | Group Time**

The composition explores linearity and duration in many ways and layers, SoS and NN explore time in different ways, and the different formats invite the listener to approach the work from different perspectives of time-based experience.

SoS deals with the dividing lines between night and day, beginning and end, and questions whether these divisions are as clear as they may seem. NN re-evaluates the linear progression of the fixed composition presented in SoS. By deconstructing and re-composing audio tracks and elemental layers of SoS, with the score (track list) as guiding script, but without exact timings or a predefined duration, NN allows SoS to keep breathing in its own rhythm and lets the work adapt to any given live situation.

The live composition can take the pace of audience and conductor

(me), and the layering of sound can be compacted or spread out depending on what feels right in the moment – acoustics and audience presence can be evaluated and accommodated live, sounds can be repeated or discarded if necessary, tape players can be used for their particular characteristics or omitted if they do not have the appropriate dimensions or capabilities.

### **Private | Public Listening**

Another time-based aspect is the listening experience. SoS allows the listener to listen in their own time and space, they have individual control over parameters such as listening device, volume, start, stop and pause. The listener can rewind the tape, re-listen to selected parts, effectively manipulating the composition – though it is hard to take full control of a cassette tape, especially with one long soundscape instead of separate audio tracks. They can choose where to start and when to stop, listen to the entire tape as a whole or divide the two side into separate occasions. They can decide to listen on headphones, incepting themselves in the space of the tower, or they can blend the sound of the tape with their immediate surroundings, blurring the lines between their own reality and that of the tape. They can listen alone or share the experience with others, sit still and listen quietly or engage in other activities simultaneously. Private listening allows the listener to be as focused on the work as they want, without expectations or judgement.

NN is a shared experience. A designated moment I share with the audience, that they also share with each other. The technical parameters are determined by factors outside of the listener's control, and the performance space impacts the listening experience in multiple ways. The listener cannot control the experience, rewind and replay to their convenience, the framed time in which this experience is offered is determined by me and the listener must adhere to this predetermined possibility.

NN is performed as a concert, with a beginning and an end, a form of listening with expectations; insinuated conventions regarding presence and exchange. I might experiment with how to position myself in relation to the audience, but even if the spatial setup does not mimic a classic stage situation, I am staging myself as presenter – and

positioning the audience in a quiet, passive listening mode. In this live setup the listener might be more or less focused, but they will not typically reveal their level of attention.

Listening with others is different from listening alone. The collective listener is aware of the shared acoustic space, and the acoustic democracy within it. The audience approach the moment with consideration and respect towards me, presenting something, and towards each other, experiencing the presentation. The collective listener might become more aware of their own sounding in the shared listening. I listen to the audience, and I become more aware of my own sounding. Being on stage, in focus, navigating and directing the situation, I am aware of the implied expectations towards me as host, performer, conductor. I control the time of the situation, and I become aware of my personal challenges with time-management.

The combined sound of many listeners might function as an organic volume control, amplifying or quieting at collectively determined points of tension and release, conducted by the sound of the performance. When I start the performance, the audience end their conversations and turn their focus towards me; they become listeners. If one person starts clapping, a collective applause breaks out. The listener is aware of the generally appropriate time for an applause when attending a live performance, and the listener is aware of the general expectation of applause following a performance.

In addition to shared presence and focus, communal listening offers an individual free space. Predefined time and motions relieve the listener of these decisions in the listening experience. The expected passivity and presence at a live performance gives the listener a predefined break time, where they can lean back and consume; listen without controlling the listening experience.

## Reality | Fiction

Spending most of my time in this bubble during the last year, living when everyone else are asleep, immersing myself in the mystique of new sounds and empty hallways, I think I have at times lost myself a bit in the surreal reality of loneliness.

Living inside an artwork that breathes on its own, breathes down my neck. Co-creating by co-inhabiting, merging with the building as we both become material. The boundaries between me and my surroundings crumble, the feedback feeds itself; I have memories of this place that I think I might have dreamt or imagined.

Blurred lines between work and leisure, fiction and reality, ambiguous isolation. I become increasingly unsure of when and how my ideas shape my environment, or the other way around. Unsure if I am documenting my actions or performing them, and whether it matters. I am my own audience, my own narrator, I am writer, director, actor. What comes first? Is it, in any way, a linear process? Flip the tape, change your hat, move to the other side of the table.

I hear the construction in the street through my window. I record it, deconstruct it, re-compose it, record it onto tape and distribute it. A week after the release party I do it all again in my dream: I hear the construction work in the street through my window, through my sleep, I grab the sounds and place them on the timeline in my audio software, chop them into pieces and rearrange them, I can see the colour-coded chunks of machinery as I move around parts, balancing it out. I am unsure if I am hearing the construction through my dream, or in it. The tape is already made, I do not need to make it again, but I have not completely understood that yet.

# CONCLUSION

SoS is an abstraction of the tower, a reinterpretation of the source (sound, site). NN is an iteration of SoS, the tape performed, and a further reimagination of the material as concept. Together, the two versions of the same material constitute the artwork. This written thesis is an analysis of the artistic component in all its iterations, the project in its entirety and the interconnected parts as separate elements. The public presentation of the thesis, the last part of the puzzle, is a performative iteration of the thesis, borrowing elements from the creative component to bring the text to life for an audience.

All these versions of the work, the different formats it gets to take, play their own crucial part in my treatment of material and concepts. The different phases the project and me have gone through have informed each other, in a multidirectional feedback loop mirroring creative choices in the work.

Working through the present topics from different perspectives, approaching them with different tools and methods, I have found answers in my work – to questions I initially asked, and to questions I did not know I had.

I often imagine how I sound, in the ears of my human neighbours, and from the perspective of the tower. I like to imagine that the tower listens to us all, hears everything we do – I imagine the tower to have numerous ears, or some form of ubiquitous hearing. I have a feeling it is always observing us, in all our little go-about and moments of action and inaction.

I considered writing this story in the voice of the tower, from the tower's perspective, writing about myself from the ears and eyes of this non-human entity that I inhabit, which I am intrinsically entangled with. It felt wrong to put words in the mouth of the tower. The tower communicates in non-verbal ways. We have conversations, but to represent that with my applied linguistics did not feel like the correct way. Instead, I opted for writing in third person when writing about me and the tower, speaking about us both in a distant, all-knowing voice.

# Composing a Thesis

It is an odd procedure, reading through piles of texts, centuries of research, seeking bits of knowledge and truth relating to your immediate situation. Like a scavenger hunt, you know the treasure exists, you have a map, it is up to you to interpret and follow it till you find what you are looking for. Education is never-ending; a thesis is time limited. You need to restrict yourself sufficiently yet allow for the process to expand naturally. You co-create the material: reading, writing, reading, writing.

Producing the written component of this thesis resembles the feeling of producing the artistic component, in ways that I had not foreseen before embarking on this journey. When composing SoS, I let the material pull me through the process, guided by my preconceived notion of what I wanted to make. Now, writing this grand analysis of the whole thing, I am aware of the formula I must adhere to, and I am aware of what I want to say in the same way as I am know what happened in a dream: clear, detailed images mix with blurred, confused scenes, I am sure they align in an order, I just need to keep my focus and grab the moments of clarity and place them correctly in the puzzle, whenever they peek out from the shadows and present themselves in my mind or on the page.

Listening through nine months of raw recordings, some several hours long, cataloguing and keeping track of the files and keeping an overview of the ongoing selection process was a tedious and overwhelming job, as much as it was interesting and full of inspiring discoveries and entertainment. Combining selected recordings in the editing suite, keeping track of all the different audio tracks for a two-sided release, was also a balancing act. In much the same way, keeping track of a year's worth of loose scribbles and associative thoughts, in separate text documents, phone notes and notebook pages, feels like a dramatized criminal investigation of evidence and key suspects, intricately combined by a chaotic web of threads, fragily held together with odd pins.

Each element initially selected due to its seemingly crucial nature, each elements losing its central status as the collage grows, complicating the hierarchy of relevance. Sometimes, the more you

work on a thing, increasingly specifying the meaning and concentrating the essence of what you are doing, the addition of nuances can feel like a dilution of essence.

All the parallel narratives are part of one greater storyline. There is a right way to put together the puzzle, I just need to find it - and not lose any of the pieces.

Writing this thesis was like composing the soundscape, I had to find a balance between concept, content and form, and figure out how to make the dynamics right for the audience.

When composing SoS, I entered the process with my own convictions of which sounds belonged together, how and why, and what that meant to me. However, the sounds also spoke of their own ontology and desires, and I allowed them to be part of the discussion and reveal their hidden relationships.

When writing, words spill out of my fingers, as if from another source than me. The text appears before me, explaining to me what it is I am writing about. If I were to try and control it, and not allow it to roam free and teach me how to treat it along the way, I think I would miss out on a lot of invaluable knowledge about my own work. I am not sure I know how to write a thesis, but fortunately it seems as though the thesis knows how it wants to be written.

The words of other thinkers, artists, writers, course through me, dancing with my own words, feedback of thoughts. They have listened, and read, and written. I have listened, and read, and written. Readings, listening, thoughts and talks merge into one mass of understanding in my mind. Ideas and experiences blur together, overlap. Constructed, composed situations shadow my lived memories, performed realities get under my skin and make me question my routines. Listening, sounding, producing, consuming, projecting, absorbing.

Meritorni will forever have a special place in my heart, for opening itself up to me as a home and collaborator, expanding itself to a legendary fairy tale and letting me inhabit the fantasy. I feel proud and satisfied that I have commemorated the place in this way.

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