

Wandering

Off.

In Conversation with
Kerstin Ergenzinger and
Patricia Pisters

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You are guaranteed to end up in a rich conversation when you bring together an artist and an academic who both defy disciplinary boundaries, fuelled by their belief in the need for noise. So when I sat down one day with artist Kerstin Ergenzinger and academic Patricia Pisters to talk about Kerstin's art installation *Navigating Noise*, we embarked on an exploratory journey through the soundscapes of the installation, leading through the realms of art, science, philosophy, and back again. This text is based on our day-long conversation, in which we discussed the need to hear noise beyond the layers of order and unity that we have imposed upon our world, about bodies without organs as well as bodies in the world, about the act of walking, and about navigating noise as a fundamental component of our engagement with reality.

Noise is the backdrop of the universe

'Noise is not a signal yet', says Patricia over a first cup of coffee. The conversation takes off where most discourses end, defining noise as a fundamentally relational phenomenon, being the foreign element of language, structure, and meaning. Within this relational framework that supports the notion of noise as the opposite of signal, noise is an inherently elusive force. It will disappear the moment you try to put your finger on it, absorbed into a system of meaning and thus remaining out of reach (Hainge 2013, 273). Following this logic – which is native to information theory and corresponds to our everyday understanding of noise – noise can be regarded as an abject and external force (Goddard et al. 2012, 45).

Informed by the idea that noise is the *unwanted* antithesis of signal and system, 'we have been trying to clean up our world ever since the Enlightenment – the dream of pure reason – aiming to eliminate or at least reduce noise', says Patricia. 'We have become afraid of uncertainty and unpredictability, especially when (scientific) knowledge is popularized.' However, she immediately adds that when we look at our world today, it is extremely chaotic and much more noisy than the clear and distinct systems that we have created to make

sense of our surroundings. In our rapidly changing, highly mediated, and globalised society, noise – and thus uncertainty – seems to permeate all aspects of our lives. Kerstin agrees that noise cannot be silenced by an overarching system of meaning. What's more, according to both the artist and the academic, we should treat noise as a fundamental component of all knowledge and communication systems. Noise is the indelible and pervasive component of our engagement with the world.

Reflecting on our conversation, it makes sense to refer here to Michel Serres's publication *Genesis* (2005), a mind-boggling exploration of the chaos and multiplicity that underlie the layer of order and unity that we have imposed upon the world. The French philosopher describes noise as the ground of our perception. Absolutely uninterrupted, it is the perennial substance.

In his theory, Serres makes a distinction between 'parasitic perturbation' (noise as a disruptive and transformative relational force) and 'background noise' (noise that prefigures phenomena). It is the latter that is foundational and, at this point, of most importance to the conversation with Kerstin and Patricia. Serres writes:

'Noise cannot be a phenomenon; every phenomenon is separated from it, a silhouette on a background, like a beacon against the fog, as every message, every cry, every call, every signal must be separated from the hubbub that occupies silence in order to be perceived, to be known, to be exchanged. As soon as the phenomenon appears it leaves the noise, as soon as a form looms up or pokes through, it reveals itself as veiling noise. So, noise is not a matter of phenomenology, so it is a matter of being itself. It settles in subjects as well as in objects, in hearing as well as in space, in the observers as well as in the observed, it moves through the means of the tools of observation, whether material or logical, hardware or software, constructed channels or languages; it is part of the in-itself, part of the for-itself, it cuts across the oldest and surest philosophical divisions, yes noise is metaphysical' (Serres 2005, 13).

Serres's 'background noise' is not loud. We are often unaware of it. However, it is omnipresent and inevitable rather than secondary and contingent. It surrounds and forms us, is beneath and beyond us, as the omnipresent, incalculable, and unpredictable raw material from which a signal comes *and* where it goes. Noise remains out of reach – not because it is absorbed in a system of meaning, but because 'background noise is permanent, it is the ground of the world, the backdrop of the universe' (ibid, 62).

We should not 'turn a deaf ear' to noise. Instead, Serres argues, we should try to hear – through both its content and form – the noise, the sound and the fury, that are the conditions of life and thought. In line with Serres's thinking, both Kerstin and Patricia believe that navigating noise is essential for our understanding of the chaos and multiplicity, of the eventful and noisy reality that we are part of. Patricia says: 'Accepting noise as the constitutive component of all knowledge systems is an attempt to break free from today's fear of uncertainty and an attempt to reconnect to the subliminal, unheard forces in the world. Kerstin's work deals exactly with these subliminal forces on both a material and metaphysical level.' So it is perhaps through art that we can start hearing the chaos and multiplicity that lie beneath the layer of order and unity that we have imposed upon our world.

Quiet noise

Although the name might suggest otherwise, Kerstin's installation *Navigating Noise* is not loud. On the contrary, it is a rather quiet piece that could come across as 'shy'. Upon entry, the exhibition space might seem to be empty, before one can start to perceive the sounds that emanate from the ephemeral art installation. *Navigating Noise's* soundscapes are fragile and can easily be disturbed (or destroyed) by loud interruptions invading the exhibition space, or even by the noise in one's own head. In this respect, the installation brings to mind Serres's 'background noise'. The senses, the body, the mind need to acclimatize to the work, like the eyes need to adapt to the dark. Kerstin elaborates on the importance of this form of

scaling down or reduction within her work: 'Due to its relative quietness, the piece asks for a heightened form of awareness, which will sharpen your perception and allow you to sense the quiet noise of the installation.'

The soundscapes of *Navigating Noise* emerge from a honeycomb-shaped aluminium structure that is suspended in space. Through the hexagon structures, Kerstin has woven over a hundred metres of piano wire that are connected with Nitinol wire. This ultra-thin robotic muscle wire is set into motion by the voltage pulse of digitally modulated frequencies coming from the controlling programme. As a result, the installation is brought to life by the vibrating piano wire and the resonating aluminium body, creating an endless range of sound qualities. The input frequencies simulate natural and man-made phenomena – such as the sound of crickets or the noise of a far-away construction site. Kerstin based the digital input on the spectrum of frequencies and amplitude of the simulated phenomena.

Navigating Noise is a hybrid of a metal and a string instrument, of a machine and a creature. Its sonic output is unpredictable, chaotic. The input frequencies are filtered and transformed by the installation's body of metal and strings, as well as by the mechanics responding to friction and temperature. *Navigating Noise* is a subtle perceptual machine that detects and responds to your movements in space. While you move through the space, the soundscapes constantly shift their tone of voice, translating the observer's whereabouts into changing acoustic fields by means of a complex feedback system. You will always remain uncertain about the relationship between cause and effect – between stimulus and response. *Navigating Noise* is programmed so that it seems to follow its own logic, as if it could decide independently whether to respond directly to your presence or to withdraw and ease back into an intentionally elusive state of being. Hence, within Kerstin's world of sounds, navigating noise is an inherently noisy endeavour. The work calls for a constant re-orientation by the observer in relation to space and sounds, while the act of sensing and sense-making merge.

Navigating Noise constitutes a highly abstract environment. But eventually the observer will discern structures and patterns within the abstract noise, while trying to make sense of the complex flow of sounds. For instance, some people ‘heard’ the ominous swell of drones, little flies, or creaking doors. Patricia recalls that *Navigating Noise* invokes associations, which in her experience are not visual nor do they relate to specific situations. While wandering through the soundscapes, she distinguished rather abstract moods reminiscent of the ‘sound of metal’, sounds that Patricia links to Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s conceptualization of metallurgy. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, the French philosophers and psychotherapists write: ‘Metallurgy is the consciousness or thought of matter-flow, and metal as the correlate of this consciousness ... Metal is neither a thing nor an organism, but a body without organs’ (Deleuze/Guattari 2005, 411).

Both a ‘thing’ and an ‘organism’ indicate an extensive and discrete account of matter. The body without organs, on the other hand, is a way of thinking about matter that is not yet formed, matter that flows. Deleuze and Guattari have cleared the way for a non-represented body. The body without organs constitutes the ‘virtual’ dimension of the actual body: a reservoir of potentialities, connections, affects, and movement. These potentials are mostly activated (or ‘actualized’) in conjunction with other bodies (or other bodies without organs).

Patricia relates Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept to *Navigating Noise*. The body without organs is a language pushed to its non-signifying limit, or, in Patricia’s words, *Navigating Noise* is a “word” in ‘the making’. Kerstin’s installation constitutes an uncertain system, which is permeated by (sonic) flows in all directions, whose potentialities are activated when coinciding with other bodies: in conjunction with us. *Navigating Noise* is in a state of ‘becoming’, continuously creating itself anew, allowing us to re-experience our own perception and renegotiate our (unstable) position within an unpredictable, chaotic world.

Over lunch we continue talking about Deleuze. Patricia is getting fully into her stride, since her academic practice is deeply embedded in the philosopher’s thinking. In recent research she has investigated his theory in conjunction with neuroscience. Besides the delicious home-cooked lunch, Patricia brings to the table Deleuze’s notion of art as a form of thought (a cerebral experimentation), outlined in the book *What is Philosophy?* (1994) that Deleuze wrote in collaboration with Guattari. They differentiate between art, science, and philosophy as means of dealing with reality: as forms of navigation through the chaos and multiplicity that is reality. We could see art, science, and philosophy as manifesting certain capacities of the brain in confrontation with chaos. Where philosophy cuts through chaos with concepts and science produces experiments and functions, art works through *and* as material, constituting a compound of sensations, percepts, and affects. Patricia argues that it is in the realm of art where thought and experience meet. ‘*Navigating Noise* is a form of thought, yet at the same time it is not abstract at all. *Navigating Noise* is also an embodied experience’, she explains.

Kerstin’s sonic architecture constitutes a metaphorical space, linking a physical, sensory experience with an abstract notion of noise (of chaos and multiplicity, as ‘the backdrop of our universe’), drawing a parallel with the way we approach the world and the continuous orientation and searching control. With her work, Kerstin renegotiates questions about the relationship between body, perception, and reality. How do we make sense of what appears to be noise? How do our bodies relate to other bodies? How do we orientate ourselves within diffuse surroundings, and how do we understand our position within an unstable, chaotic world?

Central themes within Kerstin’s artistic investigations are the inextricable relation between the body and the world, between perception and the perceived, between sensing and sense-making. Seeing, listening, touching, and smelling are

not only physiological facts, but can also be considered acts of engaging with the world. Because it is in the engagement with the world that the world – and oneself within that world – is constituted. In relation to Kerstin's sound installation *Navigating Noise*, it is relevant to refer to Jean-Luc Nancy's essay *Listening* (2007), in which the philosopher examines sound in relation to the body, differentiating between the French verbs *entendre* and *écouter*. Nancy emphasizes *écouter*, which holds open the threshold between sense and signification. Here, listening means both hearing and understanding, sensing and sense-making.

Nancy's ideas about listening are related to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body. According to the French philosopher, meaning comes into being as our bodies enter into a relationship with the world. Our sense-making of the world always takes place within the world of our lived bodies. Our senses are the 'dimensions' by which we come to realize and interrogate ourselves as beings in the world. Not only does perception unfold us within the world we perceive, it is primarily a fundamental condition of our existence, an existence that is perceptually sensed and 'made sense of'. Sensing discovers and generates the sensed. In other words, I draw my sense of the world, to which I give a sense by perceiving it. So the sensible is directly connected to the intelligible (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 235–279). Following Merleau-Ponty, we can say that by inhabiting an environment, we create a meaning of environment. Furthermore, to move in the space is also to move within the self. The thought is as the movement, which changes with the situation, while the situation changes with the movement.

Wandering off

Kerstin's artistic practice is deeply interwoven with movement, with the act of walking. Although her work is often ephemeral and highly technological, it is intimately connected to her physical experiences, perceptions, and investigations during the long hikes she takes with her partner Thomas Laepple, in unknown, often remote territory.

When moving through the landscape, she closely observes the consistencies and subtle changes of the surroundings: the horizon subtly shifts, vistas open up only to disappear again behind rock formations, changing weather conditions and elusive cloud formations. With the help of photography and drawings, Kerstin aims to meticulously record the changing perspectives. While her gaze wanders back and forth between the far distance and her sketchbook, she often 'loses her way'. Despite the precise indications of location and time, the drawings bear witness to the lack of orientation you can experience when trying to understand your position within the vast landscape.

The experience of the hikes brings back childhood memories. Kerstin grew up in the south of Germany. She tells us about the mountain in her backyard, which was 'her world'. As a child, she spent endless hours exploring its territory, throughout every season. She would collect objects, observe the insects and other animals, and would explore the terrain, often on her bare feet, over and over again. Kerstin explains that many of her experiences from her 'mountain world' lie at the heart of her artistic practice. For example, her memory of the quiet noise of the high voltage cables hovering above the natural terrain of the mountain laid the foundations for her installation *Navigating Noise*. However, her strongest childhood memory is of the heightened sense of awareness she would experience, navigating her surroundings while getting lost in thought, creating her own reality. Kerstin says: 'It is an experience of being able to deeply connect to the world: an experience that I can reconnect with during the long hikes and that resonates deeply into my artistic practice.'

When embarking on a journey into unknown territory, your first steps are tentative, unstable, adjusting to the uneven surface while looking for navigational points on a distant horizon. After a while the body will find its so-called *Trittsicherheit* (sure-footedness). Kerstin describes this experience as the body entering its 'machine-mode'. She recalls how you are constantly reminded of the needs of that machine through thirst, tiredness, sometimes pain. On the other

hand, while crossing the landscape in a rhythmic flow, the mind is set into motion and wanders off on its own. Kerstin describes this mode as a heightened form of awareness, of being both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ at the same time. To move in the surroundings is also to move within the self. Walking is as much a physical experience as a pensive observation. Sense is created ‘on the go’ and acted out in an embodied way. The experience of being thrown back in reliance on our bodies reminds us of the fact that making sense of the world is a noisy, fleeting, never-completed process. It is a continuous act of navigating noise.

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