

# Inframedia Audio

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Sitting on a hard wooden floor in a white walled room; a few dozen others there too, listening, two big speakers up the front and a few tables strewn with electronics, computers, tape machines, unidentifiable boxes. A stream of sound, a dense texture, humming, popping, grinding. Nothing that sounds like a recording or a musical instrument, even a simulated instrument: no drums, no guitars, no piano. There are sounds (more than one) but they weave into and out of each other continually, are lost and reemerge. There are loops, rhythms, pulses, slow and loping, but sliding over each other, not locked into place. The stream changes, in small increments, almost imperceptibly; a slightly altered sound, a shift in tone and texture. The moment of change sticks for a second, in the air, and then vanishes under new layers of slowness. Time stretches and warps; the stream saturates hearing to the point of physical pressure, the bass catches in the abdomen and resonates through the floor. Tiny clicking sounds, record cracks or electrical faults, puncture the space. At some point it ends; there is applause, and a figure at the desk stands up and moves away, barely acknowledging the crowd. Then time flows normally: people shift on the hard floor, talk, and drink cheap beer from bottles.<sup>1</sup>

This is one node, one moment, in a local network of contemporary audio practice. More nodes appear in other venues and contexts: online, in pubs, at festivals, in art galleries, on the radio, on CDs and home stereos, on homemade CD-Rs. Sometimes this practice identifies as 'music,' at others as 'sound.' It occasionally appears in galleries, as what might be called 'sound art,' and online as 'new media art.' It doesn't fit entirely into any one of these contexts, but spans and

draws on each of them. If a label is required, the best might be simply 'audio' – partly for its neutrality, but also to indicate that the basic material here is the audio signal; voltage in the wire, heard through speakers.

More specifically: these artists work with abstract amplified sound; they make recordings and perform live, and their live performances are frequently structured improvisations. Desktop (or laptop) digital audio processes are common, though these are alternated and hybridised with analog electronics, feedback systems, and the occasional acoustic source. The net is used widely, for distribution and live transmission of audio, as well as for collaboration, advertising, networking. The net also keeps this microculture in touch with a like-minded international culture. Nexii like UK magazine *The Wire* and the *microsound* mailing list, as well as increasing two-way traffic of touring artists, have created an increasingly solid sense that local activity is involved in a small and widely dispersed, but active, audio subculture.

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Why consider this in an art journal, albeit one organised around 'new media'? This practice is diverse, polymorphous, and understandably resistant to simple pigeonholing. It's possible to analyse it in through any number of contexts – musicology, computer music, cultural studies, sound art, and so on. This context offers an opportunity to read this work through another category, as a media art practice. That reading is, I would argue, as valid of any of the rest, and in following that reading through, some wider issues arise.

This is media art, primarily because it is so acutely self-conscious about its use of electronic media. Here sound is a media artefact, the output of an electronic

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<sup>1</sup> This account is loosely based on Vicky Browne's set at [impermanent.audio](http://impermanent.audio), Imperial Slacks gallery, Surry Hills, 3 June 2001

system, a signal; it's constructed, assembled, processed, manipulated, layered. This is neither sound as a transparent substrate for organised expression, as in Western classical music, nor sound being itself in the Cagean sense, but sound being mediated, synthesised, generated, collaged. To this point the limited analysis of this practice has focused on its interest in the audible artefacts of audio media – glitches, clicks, pops and CD-skips.<sup>2</sup> The glitch is certainly a salient feature – almost a fetish – but it's only one of a larger repertoire of media-noises, along with tape hiss, digital aliasing (an artefact of low-fidelity sampling), and the sharp clicks caused by discontinuities in a digital waveform (which are in a sense audible edits). While these sounds advert to the surface of a recording medium, many artists draw equally on the entropic internal workings of audio processing systems – often carefully entangled networks of hard and/or software. What emerges is, as Kim Cascone has suggested, a kind of sonic residue, spun away from its source into intricate patterns of decay.<sup>3</sup>

This reflexivity is unremarkable in itself; playing on the material of a medium is a solid modernist trope, and a seminal feature of the media arts – think of Nam Jun Paik. What is interesting here is what becomes of this hyper-mediated audio material. Error, artefact, accident and entropy are carefully cultivated, only to be just as carefully worked into new textures. It's significant that much of what emerges is, to this writer's ears, very beautiful – and all the more so for its abject, broken materials. There is a close attentiveness to sonic texture and timbre, to the layering and composition of elements. In general, this work opts for texture over gesture; accumulations of minimal elements; and slow, continuous change over sectional organisation. Repetition is a central device: elements cycle against and through each

other; small cycles are nested into larger cycles; macroscopic change is a product of accumulated changes in the micro-elements. Countering this micro-macro tendency is the possibility for instantaneous collapse, breakdown, interruption or disintegration; there are gentle cycles of build and decay, but also sudden gaps, cuts, bursts of noise and silence.

These hallmarks are in a sense surface features – never an end in themselves. Far more important is how these structures work, in real time and space; how they translate into sensate experience. In performance contexts, sound systems and volume levels are tuned for a balance between aurality and corporeality; so too are the sound palettes. Low frequency drones, rumbles and pulses are prominent, and vary in their effects from hollow abdominal shocks to gentle seismic flows; crackles, clicks and hisses go straight for the ear and the head; in between the warm, overdriven midrange (as found in the work of Minit, David Haines, Vicky Browne and others) works like a phantom voice in the thorax and sinuses. So the body vibrates, is pushed, pierced, bathed, occasionally assaulted; these are textures and flows of sound but also of shared sensation, moving through a specific space and duration. Extended repetition creates plateaus of acclimatisation, a soaking-in process; attention moves to the audio's interior structures, and to psycho- and physio-acoustic processes. Temporal perception loosens; subjective durations alternately compress and expand. The performance acts as a mesmeric soundfield, an involving process which opens lateral spaces for thought and affect.

Thus what's audible here is not simply a celebration of mediated audio and its specific artefacts. Certainly, the artefact is important, and it operates at one level in a conventionally deconstructive way, showing up the opacity of the medium, flawed technology, failed and false representation. Overall though, the project here is reconstructive. It spins artefactual audio out into rich and complex streams, which are rarely composed or formally

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Rob Young, 'Worship the Glitch', *The Wire* 190/191 (Jan 2000), pp52-56

<sup>3</sup> Kim Cascone, *Residualism*, online at <http://www.anechoicmedia.com/residualism2.html> [June 2001]

determined 'works,' more often durations felt out, traversed through improvisation, real-time processing and sensory/kinaesthetic feedback cycles. In that process the transgressive quality of the glitch, the click, or the exotically artefacted sample, fades. There is nothing for it to rupture, no clean surface to crack, just a buzzing cloud of other artefacts. When it's no longer an error or a failure, the artefact is simply the self-identifying sound of the media substrate, something approaching a raw apprehension of the signal, the microactivity of fluctuations in data and/or voltage which subtend digital and electronic audio. So what gets reconstructed is an aesthetic whole, certainly, but more interestingly it's one which works with the sensory and affective textures of a media substrate, rather than media 'content.'

This aversion to content — surely one of the most telling buzzwords of the (digital) media industries — is equally evident here in the prominence of process and improvisation, and in the often glacially slow and minimal nature of the work. There is often a reluctance to make a mark or gesture; soundfields are carefully balanced 'grounds' of microfiguration, immanent activity, and (near) stasis. Once again this formal tendency has an experiential side; this rich absence opens an underdetermined temporal hollow — something increasingly rare in a culture swimming in content. This hollow is mirrored in the typically sparse, 'white box' interiors of performance venues, with semiotically saturated urban environments outside.

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This approach opens a space in media practice, a stratum below or within the cultural mainlines of the electronic media. This zone — I'll call it *inframedia* — is aesthetically rich, but it's also one which is of key strategic and political importance in contemporary culture. There's a frenzy of activity: spectrum licence auctions, data protocols and standards (Gnutella), cable rollouts, digital broadcast standards, set-top boxes, DVD cracking, data compression

(mp3). Changing media technologies, and their administration, discipline, control, and misappropriation, continue to incite commercial, ethical and legislative turmoil. The very idea of 'content' reflects its status as a secondary concern; media infrastructure is where the stakes are highest.

This audio practice is, in part, a making-audible of that infrastructure; routing it out through the speakers, into the sensorium. Not jacking in, since this isn't cyberspace — ordinary, social and corporeal space never fades away, on the contrary, it's reinforced. More accurately it's a process of tapping in, a drawing out and projection of the media substrate. Some of these artists exploit the fact that any chunk of data can be 'misread' as audio; so we literally hear the alien data-substrate of the user-friendly PC.<sup>4</sup> Listen to the hard drive as if it were a scratchy vinyl disc.

If there is some cultural currency in this inframedia practice, why is it restricted to audio? In fact it isn't, though it is certainly most prominent there. This is partly due to the cultural context in which this practice operates — one where affective, textural, mediated audio was already well-established, in the form of techno. There are also technological factors: in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the flexibility of digital audio software, combined with price/performance improvements in personal computers. The result is that an average PC can be configured as a highly programmable real-time audio device. Some of the inframedia texture of this work comes from bending off-the-shelf software and hardware until it breaks, or creating iterating loops and networks of audio processes (connect *all* those effects pedals). For work in the digital domain, those textures are often a product of a particular strain of connective real-time audio software (such as Max/MSP, Reaktor, Audiomulch and Pd) which works

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<sup>4</sup> Pimmon (Paul Gough) is one local artist using this technique. See his interview with caleb.k in *Angbase 5* (2000), online at <http://noiseweb.com/angbase/issue5/pimmon1.html> [June 2001]

with abstract, tweakable flows of audio-data.

Where inframedia textures have crossed into the visual, it's often under the influence of this type of real-time software, and very often in tandem with audio. Once again techno is an important predecessor — its sensory environment always includes visuals. Real-time experimental audio has begun to add its own video, and now like the audio, it's software-generated and richly decaying, abstract, noisy, dense and minimal. Austrian outfit Skot gave a stunning demonstration of the form at last year's *What is Music?* festival; their compatriots Farmers' Manual recently played the Chauvel cinema in Sydney.<sup>5</sup> "Netochka Nezvanova", an artist who has gained notoriety on several mailing lists for her floods of machinic crypto-ascii, is the author of a real-time video processing system (nato.0+55) which operates inside Max/MSP, one of the popular audio programming environments.<sup>6</sup> There are also interesting signs that video art may be manifesting the same kind of audiovisual data — abstract, synaesthetic visuals were a strong theme in the screenings at dLux media|arts' recent *d>art 01* event. Sydney artist Andrew Gadow's *Inversion* (2000) was one of the highlights; it zooms and stretches video textures into oscillating pixel-meshes and blistering strobes, with a raw chainsaw-buzz soundtrack generated simply by rerouting the video signal into audio.

Media art in general, however, continues to be dominated by processes of content production, now largely embedded in software tools. Interestingly these in turn are being steadily marketed at the general public; media authoring (DV, CD, now DVD) is the new upselling point for home computers. Needless to say this doesn't necessarily equate to more filmmakers or

artists, but it does shift the cultural meaning of those processes. It's tempting to suggest a kind of symmetry: that the more we are bathed in content, above the substrate surface, the more subsurface inframedia we will hear and see. Perhaps it's a question of media ecology; that no system thrives without decay and breakdown, media-compost. In fact inframedia audio is, in the broadest sense, ecological, and this might be the core of its importance: it shows up the fake immateriality of the electronic media, collapses the clean, evanescent streams of data back into sensible dirt and grit; pulls the media themselves out into the material world, into temporal, kinaesthetic and affective experience.

#### Appendix - Local Audio Nodes

impermanent.audio (Sydney) — <http://laudible.net/impaud>.  
What is Music festival (Syd/Melb) — <http://whatismusic.com>.  
Synaesthesia Records (Melbourne) — <http://synrecords.com>.  
L'audible — <http://laudible.net>.  
Sigma Editions — <http://sigmaeditions.com>.  
audio.daze, 2SER Sydney and <http://2ser.com>, Thursday 10.30am - 12pm.  
Radio Alice — 2SER Sydney and <http://2ser.com>, Tuesday 11.30pm-1am.  
Hydrogen Jukebox — 2RES Sydney and <http://laudible.net>, Wednesday 9 - 12pm.

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<sup>5</sup> Skot: <http://skot.at>; Farmers' Manual: <http://web.fm> [June 2001]

<sup>6</sup> Netochka Nezvanova: <http://eusocial.com>, <http://m9ndfukc.com> [June 2001]