


The Sounds of Quarantine: How Experimental Musicians Are Overcoming Domestic Isolation

By Walker Downey  June 24, 2020 1:21pm



Still from the introductory video to Susan Philipsz's *Muffled Drums*, 2020, participatory online sound installation.
COURTESY PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY

The social-distancing imperatives of the **COVID-19** pandemic have left artists and arts institutions grappling for new ways to creatively bridge distance. While many of these efforts privilege visual content—live-streamed video lectures and performances, **virtual museum “visits”** powered by **Google Street View**, and Instagram feeds padded with collection snapshots—the pandemic has also inspired musicians and artists working with experimental sound to take new approaches to long-distance expression while limiting themselves to the sonic textures of home isolation.

MARTOS GALLERY

In late March, I began tracking the output of the online festival Amplify 2020: quarantine, which launched on **Bandcamp**. Curated by Jon Abbey, head of experimental music label Erstwhile Records, in collaboration with artistic polymaths Matthew Revert and Vanessa Rossetto, the program marks a new entry in the series of international Amplify concerts which, since 2001, have gathered together leading figures of free-improvisation and electroacoustic music. The organizers chose to forgo the standard solution of a livestreamed concert series in favor of a compendium of free recordings from dozens of international sound artists and musicians. Contributions range dramatically in both length and polish; Abbey encourages participants to think of their recordings as “**aural postcards**” from their respective states of isolation, as he said in an interview. Consequently, Amplify 2020 captures the strange uncertainty of a time rife with restlessness, boredom, and bleak beauty.

Some of the most affecting recordings render the feeling of domestic stasis and paralysis plaguing those not on the frontlines of essential work. While media artist Stephen Cornford’s austere piece *a state of enclosure* amplifies the dull hum of central heating, texturing it with the tense scraping of piano strings, musician Choi Joonyong’s wonderfully deadpan *Washing Machine* captures the percussive racket of ping-pong balls tumbling in the titular appliance. Musician and sound artist Heather Frasch’s *The sound of objects helps me remember* is a scintillating cloud of clicks, clinks, and rattles— the sonic textures, her accompanying photograph suggests, of various items around the house, including a pair of scissors, a pinecone, and an Illy coffee container. It’s a performance of a text score that prompts the participant (who, in the recording, is also the composer) to “reflect on objects, texts and sounds that remind us of our past selves.” Frasch notes that, given the uncertainty of the present, the past is more comforting than the future. As of my writing, Amplify 2020’s collection numbers 150 recordings. In its generous excess, it offers not so much a distraction as a space for extended meditation on present conditions.

MARTOS GALLERY



Cover art for *Washing Machine* by Choi Joonyong.
COURTESY AMPLIFY 2020: QUARANTINE

Muffled Drums, a web-based project by sound artist **Susan Philipsz**, demands a more active engagement from listeners, offering the ingredients of a do-it-yourself sound installation that can be constructed in one's own home with nothing more than a smartphone. Launched in late May by arts organization Philadelphia Contemporary, *Muffled Drums* is described as a “creative recalibration” of a site-specific work that Philipsz, prior to COVID-19, had developed for the Woodlands, a historic estate. Inspired in part by Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which a murderer is taunted by the imagined heartbeat of his victim, this postponed installation (titled *The*

Unquiet Grave) would feature spectral thuds and thumps issuing from the iron ventilation shafts and weathered floorboards of the eighteenth-century mansion.

Comprising four online audio tracks—three of throbbing percussion and one of Philipsz singing the English folk song “The Unquiet Grave”—*Muffled Drums* breaks down the components of Philipsz’s planned installation and makes them available to the public. Philipsz invites listeners to play her *Muffled Drums* tracks on their smartphones, proposing that they place their devices, acting as makeshift speakers, behind radiators, in cupboards, and in whatever resonating vessels might help to convey her sounds throughout their home. *Muffled Drums* is a shrewd maneuver by an artist faced with an exhibition’s indefinite postponement. The project admirably attempts to haunt at a distance, expanding its reach even as it loses historicity and atmosphere in its journey out of the Woodlands. (I’ll concede that Philipsz’s vocals fall short of their intended effect when made to emanate from an IKEA dresser.)

MARTOS GALLERY

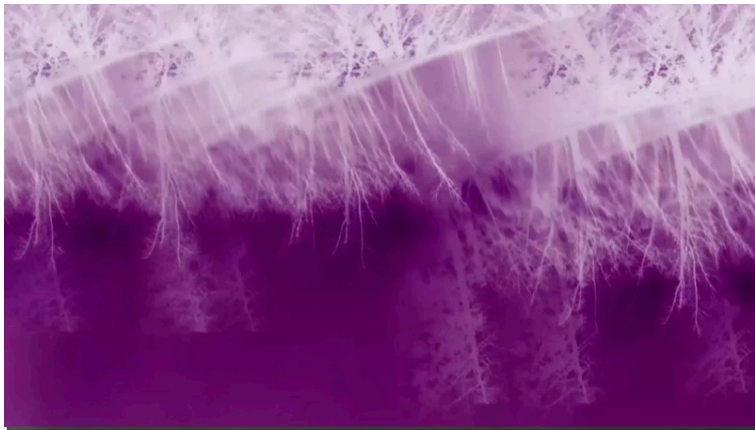
Issue Project Room's ongoing "Isolated Field Recordings" series calls attention to the daily realities of artists under COVID-19. Since mid-April, the Brooklyn nonprofit has commissioned artists from various disciplines to produce audio recordings that document their working and living conditions. Whereas Amplify 2020 has functioned without a "live" component, the "Isolated" series debuts works via livestream on Issue's website and social media channels once or twice a week. These releases are subsequently archived for later listening. Issue's call to gather and listen at regular times promotes a more acute feeling of person-to-person connection.



The view from Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste's window.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Issue's designation of these works as "field recordings" seems somewhat ironic, as the term typically refers to recordings made outside the studio. The series asks what field documentation sounds like at a time of restricted mobility. Artist, composer, and performer Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste's two-part recording *9 a.m. (Eternal)* which debuted on April 23, furnishes one answer. Paired with a still photograph presumably taken out the window of Toussaint-Baptiste's Crown Heights apartment, the two forty-minute audio recordings simultaneously capture the artist's morning routine—indexed by the clinking of silverware and the running of water—and the low-level chatter of the New York streets, punctuated, occasionally, by the ominous swirling of sirens. The work positions the listener on a tense membrane separating domestic claustrophobia from street-level desolation.

MARTOS GALLERY



LoVid: Still from *April*, 2020, video shot on a camera custom-made by Douglas Repetto with sound from the artists' handmade synthesizers.

COURTESY THE ARTISTS

April, by interdisciplinary artist duo LoVid (Tali Hinkis and Kyle Lapidus), renders the chaotic blitz of a world that has changed dramatically since Toussaint-Baptiste's transmission. The churning noise of handmade synthesizers wars with a stroboscopic cascade of color-inverted images suggesting suburbs and wide outdoor space—bare trees, open fields, rippling water. While the visuals for LoVid's contribution were filmed in April, the work debuted June 10. I can't help but note the resonance of

the piece's sensory chaos with the collective mourning and anger that has unfolded in the streets in response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. LoVid's injunction to listeners—"Blast this noise and flicker set for ruptured times!"—and their routing of donations, during their livestream, to Long Island initiative **ERASE Racism** suggest that this echo was not lost on them.

One wonders, moving forward, how those artists and institutions engaged with experimental sound might work to sonically process these more recent events. Extended isolation has given way to urgent assertions of collectivity and solidarity. The heavy silences of cities under lockdown and the muffled thumping of hearts have given way to resounding expressions of grief and frustration. What remains, in any case, is the imperative to listen, and listen together—across all distances and dividing lines.