

Opening words

TONSPUR 60: James Benning
Infinite Displacement, 2013

The Sound-Reckoner. By Tanja Vrvilo

With the shuffling of five or six indistinguishable voices, wrapped in the harmony of echoing white noise, sound landscape emerges. I do not think there were ever this many people in James Benning's time images. Usually they are missing, which happens often when the politics of images are being addressed – when landscapes are filmed as deserted crime scenes and scenes of crime just like landscapes.

The natural sound of human evidence found in the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, a landscape that is not formed by nature, is not edited. The final recording is an exact 60 minute sound actuality, physical reality in the time of hearing. The sound material moves from bottom to top, upwards to the place of the listener, 43 metres away from its source, up, off the frame and out of focus. The sound line of flight is stopped by the striated surface of a spherical dome, divided into eight segments with eight round windows. The author wrote: "There's a doorway that opens just below the dome and just off frame of the photo you sent me. I recorded from there."

This sound block of voices and noises is the sound of random community, the everyday sound created by spectators, the Museum's visitors, who do not know if they are being listened to, or recorded. The recording is pure, but the sound is impure. A plurality of high and low layers and individual tones, quiet or loud pitches of particular timbre and duration, it comes in homogeneous waves. At the very beginning someone is quietly whistling. And again at 14:02, but loudly. What dominates is the noise of German speech-sounds, distant as if in slow motion. Children screaming. Floors squeaking. Sudden beats of objects, until the fundamental tone ceases. Coughing. Crying at 40:01. At 41:55 I almost discern my native language, "Everything is fine, wait for me here." But with repetition, letters disintegrate. Cries and laughter of bodiless voices. Vanishing and silencing. Stoppage.

Six months later, the ambient audience sound has been displaced from the museum to another space, for another audience of listeners who are equally spectators: they watch the seven out-of-focus digits of *Infinite Displacement*. At first, the author listened alone, surveying a community that was caught unawares, not knowing that their utterances would be preserved and remediated. From now on, that same sound will be heard by listeners elsewhere, both the walk-in public and the emancipated participants who know they are listening to a sound work based on a natural-historical audience. The author's gesture of listening, from a somewhat hidden position, shifts this conceptual sound work towards the politics of spectatorship and divided community. Benning's singular-plural gesture places the personal into the public, as proof of presence. "If you look at things differently aesthetically, maybe you'll look at things differently politically", he says.

James Benning sent me a letter and proposed that I write a short introduction to the sound installation *Infinite Displacement*. He recorded it this spring at the Naturhistorisches Museum Wien, while shooting the film *natural history*. Even though the sound loop is a companion piece to the film work, sharing with it a unity of action, time and place, it was specifically made for TONSPUR_passage, a venue for multi-channel sound works in public space, at Museumsquartier Wien. I received the sound files, the author's introductory text, a technical description of the work and the images of the first seven individual digits (3.14159) of the number Pi – to be presented as seven posters, the only visual sign on this site of *détournement*. I also received Benning's structural description of *natural history* – the film uses the first 58 digits of Pi, was filmed at 58 museum locations ("also one shot very close to the door where I recorded for the sound installation"), and has its own synchronous sound – and I saw one single image from the film. It's an evidence of mortal community, a photograph of a series of skulls, some classified by numbers. An exhibit of death under glass, found in its proper natural-historical habitat.

Even though the stilled photo originates from the same place as the living sound of *Infinite Displacement*, it is not its image. The author's act of displacement is based on another photograph: a man and a woman, each from a different time and place, but visibly sewn together in the same photographic frame with hair, skin, cotton and wood flickering with digital colours. Editing is sometimes forbidden, but photomontage is not. The woman is Missouri Pettway, a cotton worker, and the man is James Benning, who appropriated her handiwork after her death and after her first quilt. He sent me two photographs, as proof of the persistence of displacement. Two of his artworks in the photos are part of an installation, to be exhibited in Berlin next spring. The first one shows his replica of Missouri Pettway's quilt, and the second his take on her biography, placed in a carved wood frame. Benning created the text on his Corona typewriter, a model also used by Theodore Kaczynski for his manifesto on technological society and its future. Quoting her daughter, Benning writes in Missouri Pettway's biography that she made her first quilt in 1941, after the death of her husband: "I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.' She take his old pants legs and shirttails, take all the clothes he has, just enough to make that quilt, and I helped her tore them up. Bottom of the pants is narrow, top is wide, and she had me cutting the top part out and to shape them up in even strips."

The Corona typewriter sits in Benning's replica of Theodore Kaczynski's Montana cabin, built in conjunction with his replica of Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin. The ecotechnical suture between these "adopted" cabins, both now located in the nature of the High Sierras, resounds in his recent films and artworks. In the mid-film century, on another, borrowed typewriter, Michèle Bernstein wrote down all of Potlatch's numbers and psychogeographical instructions, which were then sent to friends and to random addresses found in the phone book: "Depending on what you are after, choose an area, a more or less populous city, a more or less lively street. Build a house. Furnish it. Make the most of its decoration and surroundings. Choose the season and the time, along with the weather and your memories."

Searching for traces of artist-mathematician James Benning and his third recording ("I made three different recordings, and then selected the third one for *Infinite Displacements*."), we may also find The Third Proposition (in the chapter about Pi and the measurement of a circle) in the writings of the ancient mathematician Archimedes. But one obvious example of how the ancients continue to steal all our great ideas is in a chapter on the ancient Sand-reckoner, where Archimedes writes about the counting of infinity, opposing those who thought that sand is infinite. What is assumed to be uncountable, like grains of sand in the universe, can still be counted and accounted for, as long as we invent names and formulas (or poetics) for such large numbers.

Benning has employed Pi several times in the structure of his films, but his spherical approach transcends any reductive idea of him as "just" a structural filmmaker. His work touches upon, politicizes, and richly adds to the wide range of aesthetic forms in the history of the American avant-garde, as classified and accounted for in P. Adams Sitney's 1974 book *Visionary Film*. With his first name initial, Sitney figures among several "P"s in Benning's number Pi film from 1979, *Grand Opera. An Historical Romance*.

With his series of *Infinite Displacement(s)* in this and other recent works, James Benning shifts back and forth between two strategies in the politics of aesthetics: striated space-time where one counts and measures in order to occupy, and smooth space-time that one occupies without counting.

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