# Four Key Concepts for Studying Context-based Compositions

ANETTE VANDSØ

School of Communication and Culture, Langelandsgade 139, build. 1580, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
Email: vandsoe@dac.au.dk

**This theoretical article investigates context-based compositions where we cannot identify the real-world context from the sounds alone. Examples include Stephen Vitiello's *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd*, Jana Winderen's *The Noisiest Guys on the Planet*, Jacob Kirkegaard's *4 Rooms*, Christina Kubisch's compositions based on observations of the Ruhr district, Anne Niemetz and Andrew Pelling's *The Dark Side of the Cell* (2004) as well as Andrea Polli's *Heat and Heartbeat of the City* (2004) based on weather data from New York. The article asks how these compositions establish their relation to a specific context. How do they invite the listener to include his or her knowledge of specific contexts? The article suggests four relevant terms that are useful when studying this relation between text and context: *paratext*, *intermediality*, *enunciation* and *mediality*.**

## 1. SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

In September 2011 MoMa PS1 in Queen's, New York opened the exhibition *September 11*, which explored the 'enduring and far-reaching resonance' (MoMA PS1 n.d.) of the 9/11 attacks. One of the art works presented at the exhibition was an installation of Stephen Vitiello's now iconic *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd*, made in 1999 during an artist residence on the 91st floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center complex. In a small, dark room in the cellar of MoMA PS1, discreet loudspeakers emitted the creacking noises of the swaying North Tower and the distant soundscape of its surroundings picked up by the contact microphones Vitiello had placed on the inside of the building's windows. The audience would also here more abstract drones and noises that Vitiello had generated through a sonification of light signals seen from the windows of the Tower (Vitiello 2001).

I begin with Vitiello's well-described piece because it is such an illustrative example of the type of context-based compositions that are the main issue of this article, namely, compositions that refer to a very specific event, space, place or category. When listening to Vitiello's recordings, it is impossible to ignore our knowledge of the traumatic events of 9/11. If we want to understand the aesthetic and affective qualities of this piece, we have to consider this context, and how it is established within the piece. Over time, and thanks to such exhibitions, Vitiello's recordings have become a cultural, sonic 'text' in the assemblage of texts that shape our common cultural memory of what was a traumatic world event. We bring our context into the composition, but it also brings its context into our culture.

It is this intricate relation between text and context that I wish to explore in this article. The main topic is thus not Vitiello's piece or oeuvre. Instead, I wish to unfold a more theoretical exploration of the issues we need to confront when dealing theoretically with this kind of context-based compositions.

I could have begun this article with many other pieces, because Vitiello's recordings are far from alone in addressing specific world events, or themes and topics in contemporary culture. Many compositions deal with other traumatic world events, such as the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl or Fukushima. For instance, the Danish composer Jacob Kirkegaard's CD *Four Rooms* (2006) is based on field recordings from the contaminated areas around Chernobyl, and after the disaster in Fukushima in 2011 many composers and sound artists responded by creating new compositions such as the collaborative audio art project *Meanwhile in Fukushima*, led by Dominique Belay.

Composers also investigate specific places and specific spaces via their compositions. Most notable is Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in A Room* (1969/1971), which has been released on vinyl and CD and also functions as a performance piece. The context conditions this piece on a very specific level because the acoustic properties of the performance room assert themselves in the recorded sounds that are played back and re-recorded in the same room multiple times. Other compositions explore specific urban places – for instance, Christina Kubisch's investigations of the Ruhr district published on the CD *Unter Grund* (2014), which specifically focuses on the rich water resources of the district, while her *Movement of Distant Places* (2010) lets the listener hear the hum of electromagnetic field recordings of transportation systems made in the same district. Many contemporary context-based compositions are about specific instances of nature, in the sense that they collect and display sounds from nature. For instance, Jana Winderen's tape release

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*The Noisiest Guys on the Planet* (2009) presents underwater recordings of decapods, while Anne Niemetz and Andrew Pelling in *The Dark Side of the Cell* (2004) present an audification of cell-membrane vibrations, and Andrea Polli's *Heat and Heartbeat of the City* (2004) is a sonification of weather data.

These examples are quite different. Some are installations of field recordings, some are sound files released on vinyl, magnetic tape or CD, some are performance pieces, some we can find in the art gallery and some in the concert hall. What they do have in common is that they refer to very specific contexts. Whereas releases featuring rainforest birdsong and crashing waves depict a more general, pastoral soundscape, often with the intention of creating some sort of relaxing or soothing effect, these compositions are uniquely linked to very specific places, spaces or events, and this documenting effect seems to be essential. However, none of these context-based compositions 'reveal' their context via their sounds alone. We simply cannot hear that we are listening to the Twin Towers or the contaminated areas around Chernobyl. We have a very specific language concerning how literature narrates its content, or how a realistic picture or photo shows it. But we still lack a language about such audio context-based compositions, whose sounds cannot be used to identify which context they refer to. It is this simple question that this article hopes to answer: how do such compositions establish their 'aboutness'? And how do the specific strategies affect the way we listen to these context-based compositions? How can we analyse how they establish their unique referential and affective potentials?

In this article I wish to suggest four key terms that will make it possible to carry out a more qualified investigation of these context-based compositions: *paratext*, *intermediality*, *enunciation* and *mediality*.

## 2. HOW DOES THE 'TEXT' ENGAGE ITS CONTEXT?

The simple answer to the question about how these compositions engage their context is that they are produced by engagement in that context: they are based on field recordings or some other technological set-up that extracts sounds or data from a particular context. In all the cases I have mentioned above, the composers had to invest a good deal of time and energy in retrieving the sounds concerned.

These compositions are fundamentally different from programme music using the conventional, symbolic musical gestures of the tone/pitch language that might allude to some sort of content, and in particular the relation between the context and the 'text' is thus radically redefined in terms of production. The 'text' does not point towards its context via conventional musical gestures. Instead, it is the use of current technology and methods that allow the composer to capture sounds, or data, and publish them without having to compose all the unique sonic movements.

Barry Truax distinguishes between three different levels of internal structuring in the design of soundscape compositions. In composed 'virtual soundscapes' there is a high degree of internal structuring of the sonic text. The composer can, for instance, make collages of sounds or mix the qualities of the sound using various electroacoustic techniques, thereby creating a virtual soundscape with anecdotal qualities. In other compositions, such as those that Truax (2012) calls 'phonographic compositions', the material is chosen but not composed in detail and there is a minimum of mixing. Here the internal qualities of the sounds are still important, because the listener might recognise soundscape qualities and achieve a larger awareness of their own audio culture. As a third category, Truax mentions very context-based compositions where the internal structuring of the sonic text is automated, as in sonifications where real-world data is mapped onto sound. In these cases the listener's attention is directed away from the internal structuring of the text and towards the 'context' (Truax 2012).

The context-based compositions I have mentioned above do not constitute a virtual landscape. The composers use advanced microphones (hydrophones or contact microphones) or recording techniques that pick up sounds that the human ear does not normally detect – for instance, Vitiello's contact microphones and Winderen's underwater hydrophones – while others use technology to audify waves that are not normally audible, such as Christina Kubisch's home-made device to record electromagnetic waves in the air, and Niemetz and Pelling's use of the so-called Atomic Force Microscope (AFM) that records movements of cell membranes. I am curious about these compositions, which are haunted by realism, while the compositions of virtual landscapes are not part of my investigation because they do not have this claim to a direct connection with the real-world source. They are not made from sounds that 'belong to' or are extracted from a specific context.

While the method of production *is* important (and I will get back to that later in this article), Truax's analysis does not explain *how* the listener's attention is led from text to context when seen from the point of reception: how does Vitiello's piece invoke its context when I hear it in the cellar of MoMA PS1, where the composition is detached from the immediate context of its production?

This question is also not answered by scholars involved in the specific investigation of sonic art from the point of reception, who emphasise the contextual nature of sonic art. Brandon Labelle states that sound is always a spatial event that 'performs with and

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through space' (LaBelle 2007: xi). Compositions based on a field recording are informed by the space in which they were recorded. This 'relational quality' (ibid.: xv) affects not only sound's relation to its context, but also the listener's relation to the sounds (and thus to the context). Labelle builds his account of sound art on the fact that sound relates to its recipient in a radically different way from images, for instance. Sounds are 'vibratory waves of tactile experience' (ibid.: xv), he asserts. When he makes this claim, it is because our outer ears are not actually listening. Instead the eardrum membrane is being put into motion by the sonic vibrations, which are then translated in the cochlea into electrical impulses sent to our brain's auditory cortex via the cochlear nerve. The acoustical could, according to Labelle, be said to

> function 'weakly' in its elusive yet ever-present signifying chains, its vibrations between, through, and against bodies, by slipping through the symbolic net of the alphabetical house and delivering up the immediate present of the real, in all its concrete materiality' (ibid.: xv).

Salomé Voegelin also stresses that the perception of sound rests on different conditions from our perception of images. As listeners we are immersed into sound without any clear overview of the objects we can hear. We hear actions not artefacts, and listening is therefore full of uncertainty.

Seth Kim-Cohen opposes this 'primacy of perception'. Instead he stresses that when listening to the hum of Kirkegaard's recordings from Chernobyl, for instance, we hear them *through* what we know about Chernobyl (Kim-Cohen 2009: 132). What constitutes sonic art is therefore not sound and its media-specific properties, but its intertextual connectivity – how it constantly relates to and activates a larger 'symbolic grid' (ibid.: 119). Kim-Cohen downplays the importance of the specific sounds, and even he states that 'one need not – perhaps even *should* not – listen to *I am Sitting in a Room*' (ibid.: 193). In Kim-Cohen's view, the symbolic grid of discourses and histories overwrites and erases the effects of the individual sounds, making them less relevant or even irrelevant.

Based on my experience of Vitiello's piece at MoMA PS1, it is difficult not to agree with both the more phenomenological, relational position and the cultural or intertextual position: when I listen to the sounds of the swaying Tower and its sorroundings, I am not interpreting a symbolic language that refers to the World Trade Center using conventional symbols. Instead I am being touched by vibrations produced by the actual movements of the window membrane in response to movements inside and outside the building. Vitiello explains that he acutally created a kind of 'stethoscope' 'made of the two mics fixed to the windows, sent into my headphones via a mixing desk' (Vitiello 2001: 31). The tower is thus not only the recorded object, but also the instrument.

However, I would never be able to recognise the World Trade Center from the sounds alone, and without the knowledge of the building and its fate this would not be the same piece. In that sense, my experience of the sounds is conditioned by the symbolic matrices in the larger intertextual network; and yes, this cultural layer does indeed overwrite the sounds, in the sense that I cannot listen to these sounds 'as they are' without engaging this vast context.

Instead of embarking on a theoretical discussion of the relation between sound and language, text and context, I wish to address this problem in more pragmatic way by suggesting a few terms that can actually explain *how* the text engages a specific context seen from the point of reception, and not the point of production.

## 3. PARATEXTS

Seen from the point of reception, the very simple answer to *how* these context-based compositions establish their aboutness is that the context is *told* (Milutis 2008). Whether we are listening to the sounds of underwater life in Jana Winderen's tape release or the traffic network in the Ruhr district as in Kubisch's installation the context is told by curational notes and titles that are placed in relation to the artwork.

The French thinker Gérard Genette (1997) calls texts that are not exactly on the inside of the artwork, nor on the outside, *paratexts.* Paratexts are all the texts that accompany a literary work in order for it to be present in the world, such as the title or the cover text. Genette stresses that we cannot access a literary work without encountering its paratexts. He concludes that if James Joyce's *Ulysses* had no title, we would not be reading *Ulysses* (ibid.: 1). A paratext is therefore not a context on the 'outside' of the work, and nor is it part of the text itself. The paratext is rather 'a threshold ... an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside', or 'a vestibule that offers the world at large the possibility of stepping either inside or turning back' (ibid.: 2).

The same conclusions apply to compositions: they need a title in order to be published or exhibited – if nothing else the title 'untitled' can be used. In all the cases I have mentioned above, there is a specifying title as well as an elaborate, explanatory cover note or curational statement that explains the context of the recordings in detail.

For instance, on Winderen's *The Noisiest Guys on the Planet* there is an image of the decapods whose sounds she has recorded (Fig. 1). On the cover it says that: 'When a recording is made underwater, you will definitely hear the crackling noise of what might be a creature from the order of Decapods'.

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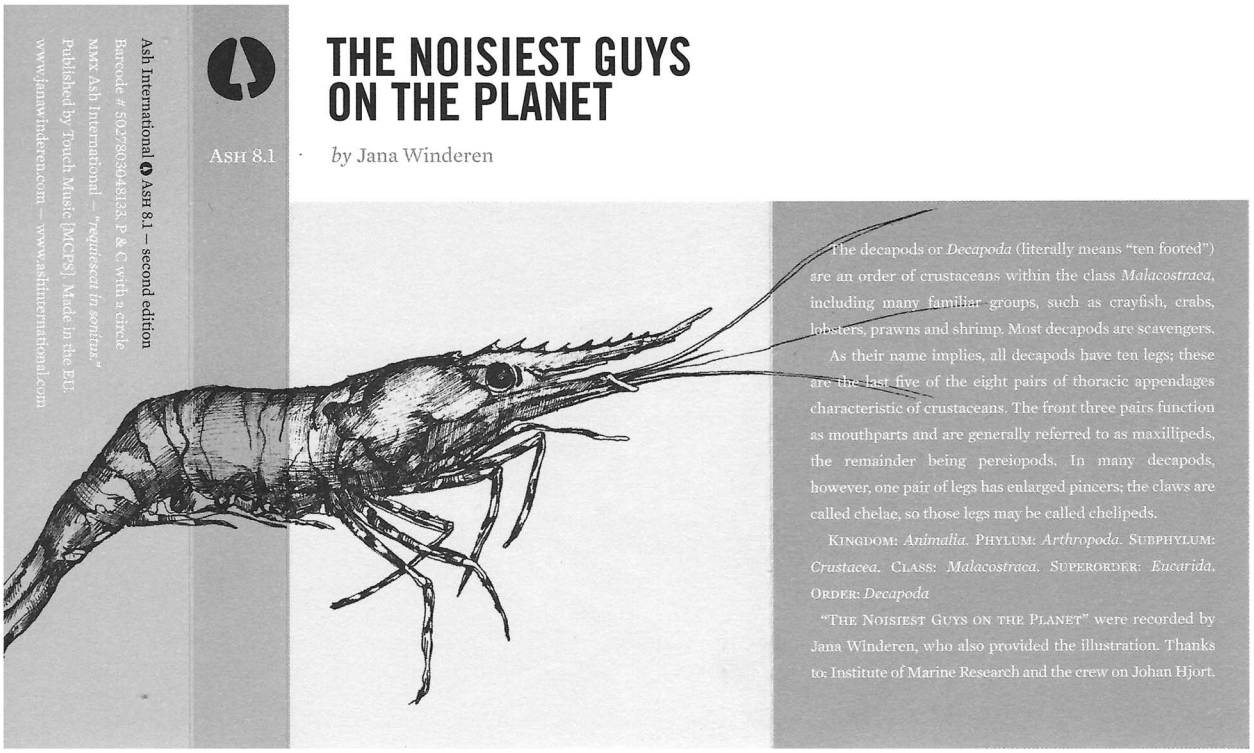


**Figure 1.** Jana Winderen's *The Noisiest Guys on the Planet*, Ash International # Ash 8.1. Recorded by Jana Winderen, who also provided the illustration, design by Philip Marshall. Printed with permission from artist Jana Winderen.

On Jacob Kirkegaard's *4 Rooms* the different tracks have titles that indicate where the sounds are recorded: Gymnasium, Swimming Pool, Church and Auditorium. The cover notes also explain how the recordings were made via sonic time layering:

> In each room, he recorded 10 minutes of it and then played the recording back into the room, while at the same time recording it again. This process was repeated up to ten times. As the layers got denser, each room slowly began to unfold a drone with various overtones. (Cover notes, *4 Rooms*)

Finally, the cover note mentions that this method refers back to Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*.

Including paratexts in our analysis of context-based compositions is a messy business, because paratexts can change, and new paratexts can emerge which will open up new dimensions in the compositions. This is excatly what happened with Vitiello's *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd*. These recordings were made two years prior to the events of 9/11, but after the attacks new paratexts framed Vitiello's piece as '9/11 art' (Danto 2002), or a composition commomerating the now demolished World Trade Center and the events of 9/11 in general (MoMA PS1 n.d.),

It is paratexts that draw in the context by referring to specific events, places, spaces or phenomena with which the recipient is familiar or which he/she might be inspired to investigate further. Umberto Eco states that many texts implicitly presuppose that their reader has a specific 'encyclopaedic competence' (Eco 1984: 7), and in the same way these compositions require that their listener has a certain amount of knowledge about 9/11, Chernobyl, Fukushima, underwater animals, etc. These compositions encourage their listener to seek knowledge and go on to what Eco calls an 'inferential walk' (ibid.: 32) to seek support in other texts outside the individual composition.

In many cases, programme notes or interviews published in relation to concerts or exhibitions will offer supplementary information. The amount of knowledge or encyclopaedic competence required from the listener does not only relate to world events, spaces or places. In Kirkegaard's piece the paratexts lead the listener's attention towards the compositional tradition of which this piece is part via the reference to Lucier's piece. Paratexts typically explain how the recordings were made – what technical equipment they required and what specific actions the composer took in order to retrieve the recordings, including lengthy journeys and research.

It is of course possible to listen to these tracks without the paratexts. Let us say that Kirkegaard's *4 Rooms* was played on the radio and the listener randomly switches the radio on in the middle of a track without hearing the speaker's introduction. In such a case the listener would not be able to recognize the context, and the experience of these compositions would be completely altered in comparison to a

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listening experience where the programme notes were immediately available. This thought experiment proves that these compositions rely heavily on the enunciations stating that 'this is the sound of X or Y'. The Belgian art professor Thierry de Duve claims that art has entered an 'enunciative' paradigm, because of the importance of the enunciation claiming that 'this is art'. He argues that the conventional Kantian judgement of taste ('this is beautiful') seems to have been replaced by this generic statement. This is what constitutes the difference between say a normal bottle rack and a bottle rack made by Marcel Duchamp. This enunciation 'affixes itself to a readymade' (de Duve 1996: 388). These compositions can be seen as part of this 'enunciative paradigm'. However, in these compositions the generic framing 'this is art' is not as important as the referential framing that indicates that these sounds belong to a specific context.

## 4. INTERMEDIALITY

If we recognise how important paratexts are to our experience of these compositions, we need to remodel our understanding of their media specificity. They are composed not only by sounds, but also by the relation between sound and text and visuals. This 'intermedial setting' (Rajewsky 2005) can be described in these cases as the combination of an open, under-determined sonic composition and determining paratext that states what it is that we are listening to. All compositions are intermedial if we take their paratexts into consideration (Mitchell 2005). But it is unique to these compositions that their title and cover notes indicate so precisely what we are listening to, whereas the sounds are open to interpretation. Voegelin (2010: xii) states that hearing is full of doubt. But not all sounds are uncertain. There are iconic signal sounds (chiming church bells) that we can easily recognise, and there are compositions with sounds we know from the cinema that indicate specific moods. However, the sounds used in these context-based compositions are full of uncertainty. It is often suggested that we can distinguish between how determined or open a text is (Eco 1984; Iser 1972). The closed, (over-)determined text leaves less room for interpretation than the more open and under-determined text. The same distinctions can be fruitful in relation to sonic compositions, where we can distinguish between closed and open sonic compositions and paratexts.

There are many texts and artworks about 9/11, Chernobyl, the traffic network or nature that wish to influence their audience. For instance, there are many documentaries about the political aspects of 9/11 and Chernobyl, and images of lone polar bears on melting icebergs and birds soiled in oil that are used to arouse our pity and concern for the environment. But the context-based compositions I have mentioned above do not use musical gesture or other concentional means to interpret the events, spaces, places or phenomena that they are about. For instance, Andrea Polli's sonification of weather data is merely an indistinct noise that increases as the temperature rises.

We could conclude that the sonic dimension of these compositions is irrelevant; but returning to my experience of Vitiello's recordings, I did find that the sounds had a large affective impact, not because of gestures composed in the material, but because I knew (or I was told) that the sounds I heard were generated by the now demolished building. The sounds might be without clear musical gestures or coded without any conventional sonic signs, but they still stimulate an open imaginary, in combination with the information in the written paratexts. The tactile dimension of sound that, as explained by Labelle, connects spaces and bodies gives these compositions an eerie and very strong effect in particular if you stay with the sounds for a certain amount of time, because we are told that we are in intimate contact with something that was there. Typically we also experience some sort of agency, an activity, although it is a non-human activity, which exists in a non-human field of hearing. Again, this interpretative action is not based on the sounds alone, but on the intermedial combination of sounds and a text that tells me that I am, for instance, listening to the electromagnetic waves from the transport system in the Ruhr district. Finally, the sound – for instance, the slowly changing drones of Kirkegaard's *4 Rooms* or the hissing sounds in Kubisch's sonifications of the Ruhr distinct – also create a certain sense of space and atmosphere. Sometimes they might remind us of, or even refer to, expressions we know from cinematic sounds or from other musical compositions. For instance the slowly microtonal movements of drones in *4 Rooms* reminds me of other micropolophonic compositions by say György Ligeti or Krzysztof Penderecki, whose *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* (1960) also addressed nuclear power.

The information in paratexts cannot be unheard once it is known. The referent sticks. It is all we hear. At the same time, this referent is difficult to grasp and recognise. I find this to be a common denominator in all these context-based compositions: they establish a nearness to that which they are about, but they do not interpret this content. Instead, the listener can only attune him/herself to the movements, the agency and the materiality we can sense in the sounds.

## 5. ENUNCIATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL (CO)-AGENCY

During the 1980s, Trevor Wishart (1996) developed a number of new concepts that are useful for the analysis

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of sonic art. Among other things, he suggests that 'utterance' is also part of sonic art. He uses the example of a radio transmission of a concert where the roof falls down to illustrate this point. He stresses how the listener's attention shifts from the music to the concert situation when the audience starts screaming. Then, in Wishart's exemplary case, after a while it is announced that this was in fact an electro-acoustic composition. Here the listener is made aware of another level of formalised utterance or 'sonic communication', namely the entire composition including the recording and mixing (ibid.: 240). After this case Wishart offers various examples of distinctions between utterances, but in my analysis I want to stick with this suggested distinction between levels of utterance. At first hand this differentiation might seem unnecessary in relation to the compositions I explore in this article because they do not involve direct utterances, such as the screaming of an audience or other human voices. We sometimes hear animal utterances (the decapods in Winderen's recording), and we hear sounds that are indicators of movements or changes in the environment of the recording, but these compositions do not have the layers of utterance that Wishart describes.

However, I do find Wishart's introduction of this concept useful for two reasons. It is useful to talk about enunciation in context-based compositions in order to address how the paratexts enunciate that 'this is the sound of…'. It is also useful, because these context-based recordings do not appear to be composed or communicated. Of course, we *know* that a composer on some level has made them, but they appear to be an almost literal one-to-one presentation of an excerpt of the world, and not a re-presentation. With Wishart we can then ask how these formalised utterances (or enunciations) achieve their apparent effect of realism. How do they make us focus on their context and not on their communicative functions?

Roland Barthes (1981: 15) notes that photography is in one sense invisible. We see what the photograph depicts and not the photograph itself. When we look at a photograph of our uncle (for instance), we generally say 'That's my uncle' and not 'That's a photo of my uncle'. This also seems to be the case in these context-based compositions. They pull us in, and place us close to their referent. When characterising the new possibilities of magnetic tape as a compositional tool, John Cage (2004: 9) writes that now we are 'technologically equipped to transform our contemporary awareness of nature's manner of operation into art'. The German media historian Friedrich Kittler (1999) has a similar understanding of the immediacy of sound recording. He explains that before the phonograph we could only represent sound by using the symbolic conventional language of music's notational system: 'all data flows … had to pass through the bottleneck of the signifier' (ibid.: 48). With the phonograph all noises could be recorded 'prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning' (ibid.: 16).

Cage and Kittler describe an eerie realism of recording: it is as though we can listen to a world that is beyond or before meaning via these technologies. However, as Seth Kim-Cohen (2009) rightfully objects, the act of recording will automatically inscribe the sounds into the realm of discourse. Despite the immediacy of these compositions, recording, mixing and releasing a CD, a vinyl or an MP3 file *is* a communicative act, a 'formalized utterance', as Wishart calls it, or an 'act of enunciation'. But this act can still have realism as an effect.

I use the word enunciation instead of utterance in order to connect this discussion of the sonic communicative act to a specific French tradition that goes back to the French linguist Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation. It is Benveniste (1974) who stresses that an act of enunciation is not just a way to mediate significant signs. It also creates meaning in itself – not a semiotic meaning that can be defined through a dictionary, but a semantic meaning that depends on the context (ibid.: 84). Enunciation is, in Benveniste's thinking, not the same as Ferdinand Saussure's '*parole*', which comprises the unique instances of discourse (ibid.: 81). Enunciation is an act. After Benveniste, thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida developed the question of enunciation. When Barthes (1994) declares the death of the author and the birth of the reader, he does so with reference to Benveniste's concept. In narratology the distinction between various levels of know ledge or narrator positions in a text is also a matter of describing the enunciated room of a text or film (Chatman 1990: 127). I think Wishart's distinctions are in line with these narratological differentiations, and therefore I suggest that we should use the word 'enunciation', and not utterance, although I also recognise that Wishart is in fact also investigating utterances, for instance vocal utterances, and not only the question of enunciation.

Edward Cone also addresses the matter of utterance in compositions in his *The Composer's Voice* (Cone 1974). Inspired by literary narratology, he writes about 'the implicit persona' (ibid.: 18) in music, which is 'the mind whose experience the music is' (ibid.: 5). Contrary to the compositions Cone write about, these context-based compositions seem to reject such a unifying position. Instead they continue a strategy from the avant-gardes, where an insertion of a technological co-agency results in a de-subjectivating eradication of the composer–subject as the sole origin of musical meaning or content. Here, there is no human mind, which has experienced something prior to these sounds, or even heard these sounds prior to the technical remediation. When we include the question of enunciation, we do not need to subscribe to the idea that the composer is the primary enunciator.

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On the contrary, we can begin to differentiate between different structures of enunciation in the compositions.

These context-based compositions also continue another tradition, namely that of experimental music that emphasises the experiment and the process but not the product. The composer is, in that perspective, not made obsolete because she is the person who instigates the process. Indeed, in the compositions mentioned in this article, the individual composer is absolutely present in the framing and presentation of the works. For instance, Kubisch's recordings of electromagnetic radiation have become a trademark of her compositional oeuvre, in the same way that silence became a trademark for John Cage. However, the function of the composer is to be the initiator of a process, not the unity from where the meaning of the content of the piece flows.

When we begin to understand recording, mixing and publishing sound as a communicative act of enunciation, we become aware of the layer that is hidden or made invisible in these context-based compositions: the invisible quotation marks that surround the sounds: '…'. And we can then begin to analyse the communicational strategy that establishes this effect of immediacy. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2002: 33) use the term 'immediacy' to describe the effect of realism that occurs when the mediating gestures are hidden. Of course we know that a realistic painting is painted, but it is painted using conventions such as central perspective that aim to give us the impression that we are looking directly at the represented world. However, in the context-based compositions I have mentioned above we cannot recognise the unique places where the material of these compositions was collected based on the sounds alone. Instead, I suggest that these compositions establish an immediacy through hypermediacy. Hypermediacy is the concept Bolter and Grusin (ibid.: 33) suggest about expressions where the artwork clearly reveals that it is mediated. So how do these compositions achieve this immediacy through hypermediacy? In order to unfold this discussion, we need to take into account the 'mediality' of the compositions.

## 6. MEDIALITY

Richard Grusin (2010: 63) introduces the term 'mediality' in a discussion on why the photographs of scenes of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison were so disturbing. Of course the content of the pictures is in itself shocking: they provide visual evidence of degrading, brutal torture and violence. But Grusin stresses that verbal reports were already circulating before these pictures. He argues that

> what makes the Abu Ghraib photos so powerful is not only that they reveal to us acts of torture and humiliation … The shock of these photographs is also explicable because they came into existence through ordinary media practices – taking digital photographs, burning them on CDs, uploading them on websites and emailing them to friends and family – that were of a piece with our own media practices of photographing our pets, our vacations ... and then sharing these images. (Grusin 2010: 65)

With reference to Massumi, Grusin introduces the term 'affect' – bodily intensities (ibid.: 81) – and he claims that we experience the photos affectively as well as cognitively (ibid.: 81), because we have an affective relationship with our media.

Whereas the question of 'intermediality' refers to the inter-art combination of sound, text and image, mediality includes the specificity of the media including the media practice it is part of.

If we look at the media practices of the context-based compositions in question, they do not resemble our everyday media practices with sound and sound recordings, because they do not reveal the social context around the act of recording. We seldom hear the voice of the person who is recording, nor sounds that indicate the social situation around the recording. Instead the recordings zoom in on aspects of reality that are *not* part of our everyday life as they make audible previously inaudible aspects. This use of advanced sound (re)producing technologies is to some degree de-subjectivating because the unique interpretation of the world made by a composer is here replaced with an objective registration of world events made by technology. What we experience when we listen to these compositions is not only sound, but also this non-anthropocentric or post-phenomenological perspective on the world.

This media practice that relocates agency from the creator to the machine, a system, or to randomness is typical of what is often called avant-garde (Bürger 1980) or experimental music (Nyman 1999). Here we are familiar with artists who seem to present fragments of reality rather than representing a unique interpretation of reality as seen in Alvin Lucier's compositions.

In this field of context-based compositions there is, however, also a strong reference to a scientific media practice. The equipment such as the contact microphones and hydrophones, is advanced scientific technology, and the methods of recording extract data from specific observations made in experimental settings in a way similar to scientific experiments. Some of these compositions even refer to specific scientific fields via their technologies and methods. For instance, Jana Winderen is a biologist and her underwater field recordings might just as well be a contribution to science – biology – as to art. While Niemetz and Pelling's laboratory experiments might also be a contribution to molecular biology. They performed laboratory experiments where the cells were

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manipulated chemically in various ways to create different vibrations in the cell walls, which they then registrered with the AFM (Niemetz 2004: 16).

If we want to understand the realism and immediacy of these context-based compositions, we need to take into consideration these interdisciplinary references to scientific media practices because they contribute to the effect of objective realism in these pieces. Because of this engagement with more scientific media practices, these compositions do not at first hand appear to be an artist's subjective *representation* of aspects of our culture, but rather an objective *presentation* of excerpts of the world. It is important to stress that the compositions are not, in fact, 'objective presentations' that give an immediate acces to 'the world'. But nevertheless they can still create that effect to the listener. The chosen technologies therefore not only condition what we hear, but also how we listen.

Douglas Kahn (2013: 4) argues that in relation to compositions using sound recordings and sonifications we need to revise our idea of what a medium is. Instead of thinking media in terms of *inscription* we need to think of it as *transmissional*:

> Inscriptive media precipitate phenomena onto surfaces (pages, scores, screens, memory devices, etc.) and are associated with recording and storage awaiting revivification, reproduction, repetition, and more storage. Transmissional media (in my usage) are inseparable from electricity and electromagnetism; they differ from inscriptive media through basic physical states of energy (mechanics, electromagnetism) and are thus historically very recent when compared to the antiquity of inscriptive media. (Kahn 2013: 7)

We could object that the compositions I have mentioned also use inscription – either digital or analogue – in their storage media; however, they all require that this code is being read and performed by electronic technology that converts the code into electrical signals and then to movements in the loudspeaker membranes. It is beyond the scope of this article to unfold a full discussion of the media specificity of sound (re) producing technologies. Still, I think Kahn's contribution can add to our understanding of the relation between context-based compositions and the specific contexts they derive from. As already mentioned, both Cage and Kittler point towards an immediacy in the way the sound recording relates the world it represents. This quality can to some extent be explained by using the term Kahn suggests, namely *transmissional* media. What we hear in these compositions is sound that is created by the specific materiality of the specific context and transmitted. In this process it might be compressed and mixed in ways that alters it more or less, and it is also transcoded into digital signals and back into sound. To conclude the medium is not transparent but it is also not based on an inscription of signs that describe their content, but rather on a (more or less transparent) transmission of energies.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: LISTENING TO CONTEXT-BASED COMPOSITIONS

In the introduction to this article I claim that these compositions are contributing to our shared cultural concepts and narratives. They are not only reproducing reality, but also contributing to how we understand, talk about and think about the world. What is it exactly that enables these compositions to add new perspectives to essential categories in contemporary culture?

In the beginning of this article I briefly mentioned the two opposing positions – a more phenomenologically oriented approach with a focus on the sonic event and perception, and the more culturally oriented approach that focuses on the larger discursive networks. As a conclusion to my investigation, I want to return to these two positions and their ideas on how text and context correlates. In my analysis I have tried to show how the singular compositions inscribe themselves into the larger textual networks via their paratexts. In doing so I have also shown how the sound in these compositions never functions as an autonomous vibration that exists in a non-symbolic realm. However, I have also suggested that the mediality of these compositions is different from that of texts and images. The sounds we hear are not notated symbolic signs with a referent. Rather we hear sounds that on a material level are shaped by the context they come from. Even though the sounds are compressed, mixed and reproduced, they are still produced by their context and, in that sense, semiotically speaking, not functioning as a linguistic sign. We therefore need to address the specific medialities of these compositions, and look at them as a communicative act that is done with the use of sound (re)producing technologies.

Finally I want to add one last dimension. When Labelle and Voegelin emphasise the singularity of the sonic event, they do not refer to the social event or the sound recording, but to the *material* event of the sound as it is produced and/or received. However, I think the social event of the sound production is equally important if we want to understand how these context-based compositions have an impact on the surrounding society. When I listen to these compositions, I do not only hear sound, read a text or experience the materiality of the context or the technologies involved. I also experience these compositions as a witness of something that was done – of the social event where the composer used technology in order to engage in a specific context, as experimental compositions. The finished composition is both an aesthetic product in its own right and a documentation of the process that

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produces it. Therefore these compositions can be seen as an exploration not only of a specific cultural context, but also of their own technological context. In particular they can be said to explore how we can engage ourselves in the surrounding culture via technology. They are examples of what has been called material participation (Marres 2012), and they both reflect such a media practice and inspire future practices.

Truax concludes that soundscape compositions can establish a sensitivity towards acoustic ecology. In line with his analysis, I wish to suggest that perhaps these context compositions establish another kind of sensitivity which is still directed towards our acoustic ecology, only an audio ecology that is technologically mediated. Our audio ecology is not only determined by what we can hear with our ears alone. Our visual perspective has been enlarged with advanced technology and digital platforms such as Google Earth, and in the same way we have also expanded our audio range. Today we are able to listen both to the seismic movements of the earth and to gravitational waves.

A study of this kind of context-based compositions, where we cannot identify the real-world context from the sounds alone, will not only give us knowledge about developments in the broad field of sonic arts, but also give new insights into how we produce and reproduce cultural categories and narratives by the use of sound (re)producing technologies. And finally, it will give us insight about what it means to listen to the world. In order to analyse how these compositions establish their unique referential and affective potentials, I suggest that we include the concepts of *paratext*, *intermediality*, *enunciation* and *mediality* not only as a way to perform an informed musical analysis, but also as a way to understand the connection between compositions and the larger cultural context to which they belong.

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