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Words: Charles Shafaieh
Images: Jacob Kirkegaard,
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Jacob Kirkegaard listens where others don't. Using accelerometers that detect vibrations instead of more traditional contact microphones, the Danish artist has captured the sounds of Chernobyl, morgues, calving glaciers, and even those produced by his own ear, all in an effort to go beyond what we assume are our sonic limits. In *TESTIMONIUM*, a new work that took him to the Dandora dumpsite in Nairobi as well as waste management facilities in Latvia and Denmark, he once again recorded sites whose existence are overlooked and completely unknown to many.

Inside a former bank vault in Oslo at this year's Ultima Festival in September, Kirkegaard premiered the 25-minute, 8-channel audio-only version of *TESTIMONIUM*. The piece plays with our predispositions concerning trash: the high-pitched crinkling of plastic bags evokes the soundscape of crisp leaves or of crackling fire; the rhythmic pulsing of a production line, which shakes in order to cool down the slag that has just emerged from an oven, would not be out of place reverberating around a nightclub; even the gurgling of sewage from Copenhagen's toilets entices the ear with its dense, soupy texture.

That these sounds are engaging, and even appealing at times, creates a sense of discomfort upon later hearing them accompanied by the footage of rivers of feces and burning mountains of trash in the audio-visual iteration of the piece, which also played during Ultima. But that psychic rupture is precisely the point, as it opens up a new space to contemplate the waste that is usually kept at a distance from society through highlighting an aspect of it that has gone unnoticed. This in turn complicates our visual reception of these spectacles. The soundscape's abstractness, Kirkegaard suggests, might allow for more productive thought and conversation than pure intellectual discussions.

Kirkegaard's work echoes photographer Taryn Simon's *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007), for which she photographed places and things that are in some way

foundational to American society, but which remain out of sight or restricted except to those with special access—for example, the Contraband Room at New York’s JFK Airport, controlled by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. In an essay about Simon’s work, Salman Rushdie writes, “Ours is an age of secrets. Above, beneath and beside what Fernand Braudel called the ‘structures of everyday life’ are other structures that are anything but everyday, lives about which we may have heard something but of which we have almost certainly seen nothing, as well as other lives about which we have never heard, and yet others in whose existence it is hard to believe even when we are shown the pictorial evidence....In a historical period in which so many people are making such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of the people, an artist like Taryn Simon is an invaluable counter-force. Democracy needs visibility, accountability, light.”

True as Rushdie’s words are and despite frequently evoking “hearing,” he privileges the visual in relation to knowledge. Kirkegaard, however, addresses the limits of knowledge if we consider sight as its apogee. The spectator can remain at a remove from the waste presented in images. But by foregrounding the sonic, Kirkegaard penetrates and envelops the body with trash, blurring the lines between exterior and interior, spectator and object.

In the following in-depth conversation, Kirkegaard spoke with *National Sawdust Log* about the origins of *TESTIMONIUM*, the secondary status of the auditory sense, his other new work that focuses on post-mortem environments, and how art can influence conversations about serious issues such as global warming and waste management—and also how it can fail.

NATIONAL SAWDUST LOG: How did *TESTIMONIUM* originate?

JACOB KIRKEGAARD: Waste has been an ongoing interest of mine for years, especially after I moved to a house outside Copenhagen where they divide the trash into six different waste bins. As my consciousness of waste grew, so did my desire to follow the path of the trash—to “eavesdrop” on it with my microphones.

I started discussing this project with Nao Takeuchi, a friend of mine who is a waste management expert at UN-Habitat in Nairobi, Kenya. The Dandora dumping site, one of the biggest

landfills in the world, is located there, and UN-Habitat focuses on creating awareness of waste by establishing projects and speaking with the local community and city council. About a year ago, Nao invited me to contribute to an exhibition in Kenya held by the UN.

When I arrived in Kenya to record, however, it wasn't really possible to get to the landfill. You can't just go there with expensive microphones. We had to speak with numerous groups and various people, and eventually a man from the Nairobi city council spoke with the general manager of the landfill, who let us inside.

There's a perverse irony that the waste, which we discard and want far away from us, is so protected from much of society by bureaucratic channels and other means. But, of course, it is also part of many people's everyday lives.

Very poor people make their living picking up the trash, but few people from Nairobi have ever visited the site. The taxi drivers, for example, asked us why we wanted to go there. It's an area in which the piles of waste simply ignite into flames, and the waste-pickers who live in the slums around it sometimes suddenly step into those fires. It's very dangerous, and I saw many people with burns on their hands, arms, and legs.



Can you elaborate on the title? Its two-pronged etymology, from Latin, is particularly poignant concerning waste management and global warming:

testis (“witness”) + monium (“obligation”).

In general, my titles are hints. I don't like to tell people, “This is what you need to think.” I like to plant the seed and make people feel by themselves. Titles shouldn't be too obvious or too wordy; they should be neither positive nor negative. That being said, *TESTIMONIUM* is a bit more on the obvious side for me. It's something we leave behind: a message, a statement.

“Witness” is also what I was getting at. When I was 17, I worked for the summer as an assistant to archaeologists who were excavating a graveyard. I was very interested in what they found in the earth: pearls and all kinds of beautiful old things. I wondered what people in the future would find from our generation. It probably won't be gold or ceramics. It's going to be plastics and radioactive material. Our waste is a testimonium of our time.

But it's also true that waste is valuable. It was perfect that I premiered the piece in a bank vault at Oslo's Ultima Festival, because while we tend to talk about money and shit in the same sentence, waste can also be valuable. If it's treated well, it creates energy. All of the waste management plants in Denmark brand themselves as “energy plants” because they burn waste and create heat for the heating systems that heat the water. Other plants make clean water out of sewage, too. For the waste pickers at the landfill, it's also valuable because they make their living from it. Because of this, the waste is valuable and should be kept in a vault!

Jacob Kirkegaard - TESTIMONIUM (T...



Rather than make a documentary about waste, however, you created a work of abstractions. Why?

I'm interested in creating something that balances on the fine edge between reality and non-reality. I'm quite bored with the concept of reality, with people who say things like, "This is how things are." So I'm trying to create a new listening experience by focusing on specific parts of a sound environment.

In one instance with the landfill, I removed the midsection frequency spectrum where you have sounds that are more or less ambient that make you accept the space as natural. As a result, you now only have deep frequencies – a low rumble – and high frequencies, which are the plastic bags.

It's like when you focus psychoacoustically and block out everyone's voice but one person's. It creates an unreal but real world—a world you accept when you see the smokey landscape of the landfill with garbage all over, but when you listen to it, you know that something isn't right.

Through advanced recording techniques, you focus psychoacoustically for us so that we might actually listen, and listen closely, to these different sound ranges. You're highlighting that our "everyday hearing" is, in certain respects, non-hearing, and then teach people in a way to hear almost as if for the first time.

Yes. And additionally, in the 8-channel piece, almost every sound is recorded with vibration sensors, which means I'm inside the objects: I'm inside the tubes, the trashcans, the liquid shit. You haven't heard waste like this before.

They sound familiar because they have familiar characteristics—and yet they're different. If the sounds are just strange, people can simply accept the strangeness, and if they're super-real, they just confirm what is already known. With these sounds though, I present a different reality to which you're not accustomed, and that's a bit alienating. And the alienation created from it can open up new ways to perceive the world and ourselves.

The same is true for another new project of mine entitled OPUS MORS (2019). For one of the piece's four parts, *Opus Autopsia*, I recorded the sounds of an autopsy. I don't think that's been done before either. (The filmmaker Stan Brakhage created The

Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes, a 16mm portrait of an autopsy, but it is silent.) Death is usually about looking, which is overused—in horror films and crime stories. We don't really know about the sounds of our own flesh. We usually talk about our organs in a metaphorical way: we listen to our hearts or our stomach's feelings, to the words formulated by our tongue. We don't listen to the tongue itself. When organs are gently being sliced though, their characteristics can be deciphered by listening to their respective timbres.

So in this piece, I tried to go as close as I could. It's just our bodies, but these sounds are also new and weird, normal and yet not normal, real but unreal.

The piece asserts an intimacy with the body, which, in death, many of us treat as something to be discarded and shielded from society—like trash. Literally going into that which we throw away or separate from life has obvious philosophical resonances, but would you also be less satisfied acoustically if you did not put the microphones directly inside what you are recording?

It makes a big difference. The accelerometers I use are vibration sensors used by those who monitor oil pipes, airplane engines, and power plants. They normally don't record the sound; they measure the vibration of, say, an airplane engine, because it's important that it moves at the right frequency. They're very sensitive and much better than contact microphones because, first of all, they sound great, and because I can get close to objects and create intimate portraits. They let me hear the microcosmos; they open up worlds we've never heard.

Conceptually, it resonates with how I get inspired—not listening to things but listening within, beyond the immediate. For example, there's the stench and horror of waste, but I ask, can we go closer or beyond? And when we do, it sounds interesting, maybe even beautiful. The sounds' textures draw you in.



Sonic beauty complicates preconceptions. In the 8-channel piece that does not include any images of waste, and even occasionally in that audio-visual composition, you trick audiences by entrancing them with that which they might otherwise find monstrous or horrific if they knew the source. The sounds can't be "disgusting" because it isn't clear what they are without images of sludge, piles of trash, the haze of burning plastic, etc. They're signifiers without signifieds.

Somebody once asked me when I did my Chernobyl piece, *Aion* (2006), why I chose to make such a beautiful video piece out of something we feel so difficult about. I'm not trying to romanticize anything. The way to talk about difficult things, I feel, is to create an environment for listening. We tend to talk about things to try to understand them, but sometimes, somehow, we end up missing something. Could it be that the act of listening can open us up for a more sensuous perception, which can lead to a fuller understanding? To a fuller grasp of something than we would achieve using our intellect?

It's obvious why people create an ugly image of waste so people will take action. I get it. But I'm trying to create spaces in which we can get closer to that thing that alienates you so that you can act. I don't work to make people become political activists. But if you're super open to loving the sounds, whether or not you know what they are, it can create an interesting space when you're eventually told that it's waste you're hearing. Because psychologically, if you're already alienated from the moment you start seeing something, it's difficult to act. You're already cut off.

I installed *OPUS MORS* in a little barn in Switzerland with one little light bulb, and people heard the slippery sounds upon entering the space. Eventually, they would approach a table with the track listing that detailed which organs they were hearing.

After being calm and interested when they entered the room, they became curiously shocked. All I have to say is, “This is the sound of death, of horror, of Trump’s bathroom,” and people start to hear that.



Alienation via smell, like the stench of the landfills, can overwhelm a person to such an extent that restricts not just their hearing but any kind of serious thought or action. That would be one argument in favor of creating works of art about waste and, in relation, climate change that rely on distortion of some form, of removing elements of the real from the conversation.

Yes, and the same is especially true for *OPUS MORS*. The smell was super strong in the autopsy room, and at the forensic decomposition study facility where I recorded, too. And it’s also the case with stunning images, like the icebergs I recorded in Greenland for *ISFALD* (2013) and *MELT* (2016).

For many years, I’ve made field recordings and taken those into other spaces in order to facilitate isolated listening experiences. I’m interested in pure listening without being obviously political. Some sound art is too brainy and makes you think, “Just write about it. I don’t need the work to understand this.” Because I come from music and sound is the starting place for all my work, I want every sound I create to appeal to the ear. I want my pieces to work by themselves so that you can just listen to them. Of course seeing bodies decomposing looks like a horror film, but if you can get past that, you understand it’s just nature doing its job. It’s beautiful—and it sounds great!

Regarding whether art should tackle issues like climate change is difficult to speak about because there are so many different types of art. I think it's very cliché to think, "I want to save the world." But what I think art can do is create a space, in my case, where you can listen without having to be pushed to either camp of whether X or Y is good or bad. When I engage with the media or hear politicians talking, I see people trying to convince me about what I should think. A sound environment can offer an alternative space for contemplation where you can just listen—to difficult things, to controversial things—without having to be alert. If you can have a space where you can really listen, you are able to feel something instead of only being with your brain. People came out of *ISFALD*, and said, "Wow! This is what global warming sounds like!" even though I never mention global warming in it.

Another example is my piece *THROUGH THE WALL* (2013), with recordings taken from both sides of the the "Apartheid wall" in Israel/Palestine. People who know me won't doubt what my motivation was to create the piece – that I don't like the wall, and am opposed to what Israel is doing – but it's about walls in general: Trump walls, Brexit, all the walls and barriers in the world today. Of course I want to draw attention to what is going on in Palestine – there's too much ignorance in the world, and I hope my works can at least be invitations to listen – but the piece is not about my being pro-Palestinian or not, but rather about trying to create something more open. When you are in the room with this wall structure, you hear sounds from both sides of the wall's sound environments. You wonder where this ambient sound is coming from, and then discover that it's all coming from inside the ugly wall itself. It doesn't matter which side is which. Sound travels freely from one side to the other.

Having the sounds emanate from the wall itself resonates with a recurring theme of intimacy, as well as entombment, within your oeuvre. By going within using your microphones, you're heightening an awareness of exteriors as well as interiors, and also the tension between those two spheres. That's the case for the natural environment in *TESTIMONIUM* and *ISFALD* and for the human body in *OPUS MORS* as well as *EUSTACHIA for 18 EARS* and *LABYRINTHITIS*, the latter two of which involve projecting otoacoustic emissions from the cochleas. The result is a more empathic and embodied

reaction than, say, the dislocated experience of viewing a painting with one's eyes at a removed distance or reading words in a novel. In that way, your works also act as an argument for privileging sound and listening in general.

Sound has a lower status than the visual in society. You can bike through a city without listening to your surroundings, but you can't do so without looking. And the visual is a more concrete sense.

At the same time, you cannot close your ears like you can close your eyes. You can also listen to specific things by focusing psychoacoustically: by using your brain, you can appear to be listening to me but really be listening to something else, and I can't tell. It's a less revealing sense.

Because of these aspects of hearing, there is a certain space available where you can be free to listen in a naive sense. We are fed so many intellectual facts along with claims that some facts are fictions and vice versa, and many of us try to find our balance through this, to determine what we believe. It's not very practiced in Western society, but listening can offer you a space of awareness within yourself. Without sounding too pretentious, the hearing organ is such an intimate organ that, if you use it more, you can get closer to yourself.

Jacob Kirkegaard, who is represented by the Fridman Gallery in New York City, will present OPUS MORS at the CTM Festival in Berlin on February 2, 2020. Look out for updates for additional performances of it and TESTIMONIUM via Kirkegaard's website: fonik.dk

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