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The Foley Studio
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How To Put On Weight

Sitting cross-legged on the temple balcony, the bowl of my body facing the forest's green wall, my eyebrows suddenly rose up, my eyes widened and my lower jaw dropped open as the sounds met my ears: the creaking, twisting trunks, the shimmering splay from leaves and, every so often, sharp resounding cracks of a bamboo tree bent so far and so fiercely that it rebounded to strike its neighbour. No matter how many times I ventured back into the forest in the following week, I only heard the faintest echoes of that original force. "Now you know Zen," Itsushi said.

Months later, my mind kept drifting back to the temple and the "borrowed scenery" of the bamboo, remembering ambiances and associations that roused ruminative reverie or encouraged me to eager chatter about the "percussive symphonies" that enflamed my ears in the moment but which the hastily shot MiniDV footage turned to ash. Convincing a record label known for "pure phonography" to commit to what would be my first LP, I secured funding to travel the 6,000 miles from my home back to Kyoto's Kami-Katsura district, carrying a scuffed North Face cargo bag containing every recorder and every microphone I owned.

Utter stillness in the spring forest: the thinnest tips unbending, the slenderest greenery showing no sign of susurration. After eight wandering days recording everything that wasn't bamboo, my frustrations erupted in a frenzy of fakery: snapping branches in front of a mono microphone, contorting bark until it squeaked, rubbing and shaking the driest leaves; prising contacts between roots and into cavities, pushing and pulling otherwise inert bamboo shafts. The manipulation continued back home: snipping audio files, slotting them into a timeline, sliding them left and right and slowly accumulating the strata of sonic sediment for a simulacrum of that "symphony".

Ashamed that these experiments violated the record label's "do not process" imperative, it was really a relief when nothing I did came close to good enough. The awkward artificiality of the edit persisted even when it was immersed in a nice recording of a soft dawn air. The phoniness persevered even when I used the Handycam footage as a guide track for manoeuvring the snipped samples. I wasn't being overly protective towards the lustre of those original memories: the bamboo forest's "percussive symphony", however audiogenic, was really an exceptional event, so insubstantial that the slightest touch caused it to crumble.

Many years after Kyoto, Itsushi - of the ironic "Now you know Zen" comment - breezed unexpectedly into Cafe OTO from the cold wearing a battered sheepskin flying jacket. Itsushi, a Buddhist priest, poet, filmmaker and anthropologist had come along with Yan Jun, one of my favourite artists, and - star-struck, flustered but wanting to belong - I garbled a rendition of the "percussive symphony" tale. After I ran out of steam, Itsushi revealed that he lived for a long time at the edge of the bamboo forest yet had never once heard the trees rattle in the way I described.

While waiting for the bamboo drama to return, I let recorders pause (blinking LCD numerals or a red diode) and I deleted recordings deemed too tedious. Those ostensibly incidental sounds of the district are what I now wish I had fixated on. Make-do residues, scraps and off-cuts were what I ending up using to create my LP, but how different if I'd focused on these from the start? "How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?".¹

With Perec, we value speaking of "these common things", tracking them down, flushing them out, weighing them up, giving them "a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are".² These common things have the capacity to astonish and in 1973 Perec references recording technologies (UHERs, Nagras, Tandbergs and Stellavoxes?) as a context for that astonishment, thinking of the wonder experienced by "Jules Verne or his readers... faced with an apparatus capable of reproducing and transporting sounds. For the astonishment existed, along with thousands of others, and it's they which have moulded us".³

The common things are what Diana Deutsch claims hearing is "constantly identifying and grouping... into unified streams, so that we can focus attention on one of them while others are relegated to the background".⁴

For Nina Krause, these minutiae still subliminally spike adrenaline even when consciousness tunes them out as "background noise".⁵ Is this why media (film, theatre, games, radio) pulls the fader right down on the qualities and quantities of quotidian sonority? Do too densely detailed representations of the audio everyday seem to produce febrile listeners that only silence, music and reassuring reverberations of the voice can assuage?

More authentic reconstructions of auditory specificities might cause sensory disorientation, as Melody Jue observes of Ernst Karel's design for Leviathan: "the intense rumble of the engine alongside the crash of waves and echoes of fish hitting the deck. Through its tilts and screeches, Leviathan makes us perhaps a bit nauseous, disrupting the balance of our inner ear."⁶ Yet turning down cinema's trinity of silence, music and voice amplifies other possibilities: field recordings from those astonishing reproducing machines and the practices of Foley in which the masses, shapes and textures of common things are first measured then made to live again.

As much as attending to the ordinary, Foley addresses the weight that mass, shape and texture deliver: the impression of weight in an object or event the Foley artist must gauge (with fingers, with ears, with imagination⁷); the sensation of weight transmitted to the listeners (this second operation deploying a set of alchemical scales to convert paper clips into dogs' claws, bin bags to fire, tin foil to thunder, gloves to wing flaps⁸). I could bring no heft to the bamboo, whatever I tried, but outside media conventions, others are currently opening Foley to tactical, subversive, fun, critical explorations.

Rebecca Glover's *The Foley Studio* assembles a laboratory for further experiments, a sonic speculation that sets a stage of common things (and uncommon ones, too), amasses props to excavate the ordinary out of the background noise in which it gets buried, draws diagrams to guide the auditory back to astonishment and envelopes all in an atmosphere that weighs heavy and light in rattles, jangles, zips and shimmers, in crumples, cracks, shuffles and steadier steps, in rummages and riflings, in scribbles, squeaks, and scrapes, in clicks, bubbles, trickles and tinkles, drips, creaks and clangs, in comings and goings, beings and becomings.

Angus Carlyle

1 Georges Perec, "Approaches to What?" in *Species of Spaces and Other Places* (London: Penguin, 1999) p. 220

2 Perec op cit. p. 210

3 Perec op. cit. p.210

4 Diana Deutsch, *Musical Illusions and Phantom Words: How Music and Speech Unlock the Mysteries of the Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 46

5 Nina Krause, *Of Sound Mind: How Our Brain Constructs a Meaningful Sonic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2021), p. 209

6 Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2020), p.165

7 Julie Rose Bower, "The Sound of a Door: Reflections on tactility of sound design for *Feeling Thing*, a dance film by Candoco dance company and Jo Bannon" (2022) *Performance Research* 27 (2)

8 Mark Peter Wright and Angus Carlyle "Dissonant Doppelgänger: Performing the Post-Natural Through Modulated Foley Techniques," (2021)

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