

Walking through the Anthropocene

Soundwalk

By Lisa Hall for Klangstaetten | Stadtklaenge 2023 Braunschweig

Location 1: Burgplatz



The centre of the city

Bring your mobile phone and a portable speaker to a location in the centre of the city. Find a comfortable place to be for a few minutes and then read to yourself:

Here we are in the anthropocene together.

The Anthropocene is the age that we live in now where our human activity affects the very geology of the planet. It is so significant that we affect the whole globe, the weather systems, the earth, the air and all other living things. Think of 'superstorms, acidified oceans, antibiotic resistant bacteria', a swirling mass of human and more-than-human assemblages.¹ Another way of thinking of it is that we are entangled within everything else, and everything else is entangled within us.

When I first heard this term, the anthropocene, I understood it and recognized it as the climate crisis hitting a new level. However, I couldn't fully understand or feel it, the idea of absolute entanglement led by human living, it seemed out of grasp to me, lost in the notion of there being edges to human living, to our pollution, to our occupation and presence.

Generally I think about things through art, though making art myself and experiencing other people's art. Creative expression is not only an outcome to be enjoyed or experienced, but it is also a way of thinking about and exploring the world using different logics and processes. I think through sound often, I think with sound or from a sonic perspective, I'm interested in how sound can offer other ways of connecting with the world around us due to its different logics and processes that can differ from the conditions of visual dominance.

I want to share with you my thoughts about the anthropocene, about walking through it every day. I'm hoping to share some feelings of entanglement with you, in

¹ This is from Kate Wright's text *Becoming With* that you can read here: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/5/1/277/8177/Becoming-with>

this city as our stage of human living using the seemingly illogical and purposelessness of sound.²

I invite you to listen to sounds through your speaker on this journey, there are QR codes through the text. Please do not think of this as sound or music that you will perform to passers-by, but think of it as sound that is an extension of your body, for you to listen to. Think of it as a phantom limb made of sound that you will affix to yourself and carry today.



Play from your speaker:



While the sound plays, stay still and read to yourself:

There's no better place to think about all of this than here in the city, in urban space, in this human made habitat designed for human living. We are now a global urban population with more than 50% of people in the world living in cities, towns and megacities. Urban space is our primary habitat.

These urban spaces were formerly wild spaces, areas of land that were cleared of trees, plants and other living things, flattened and built upon, the cobble stones and tarmac laid out, buildings erected, pipes and wires implanted in the walls and floors running deep into the earth.

A city is defined by population size, by how many of us live here. A city therefore is just a way to describe a concentration of human beings. You are slap bang in the centre of this city. This is the epicentre of this human concentration.

² Salomé Voegelin describes sound as purposeless in *The Political Possibility of Sound* - an exciting provocation into the possibilities of something that is often considered as having no purpose. Page 5.

This idea of a concentration means that there must also be a dilution, an end to all of this intense human living. Out beyond the city limits there are rural and industrial spaces where we live in lesser concentrations, there are also natural or wild spaces where we live sparsely or not at all. The very idea of a city dictates that there are other places where humans are less present. But this idea has been breached, we are now in the anthropocene and I feel that human concentration is no longer appropriately measured according to where we live.

I've been listening to other artists and curators who explore cities, sound and human living, and they have led me by the ear to sites that fall well outside of the city walls yet are so essential and integrated into urban life³. They've led me into jungles to see cattle farms raising our food and to see rivers washing away chemical waste from silver production, they've led me down into the earth to listen to minerals extracted for our electrical devices, and they've led my thoughts into the oceans to find data houses storing our emails while making new ecosystems in the warm water they create - all things that are far beyond the perimeter of the city but are very much implicated in what it is to live here.^{4 5 6} I have begun to see all of these non-urban activities as other acts of concentrated human living, where we dominate an environment for minerals, fuels and flesh that service human living. To me this feels no different from the city. I've come to understand these remote sites as part of an urban reach - down into the earth and up into the air, the tentacles of human living that stretch well beyond what we can see in the centre of this city. I have begun to understand the anthropocene through this reach.

The sound you're holding, that you're emitting from your phantom sonic limb, is an electrical hum. It is the sound of electricity, the lifeblood of urban living that is generated from afar, by fuels extracted from even further away, piped into urban centres and stored in batteries like the ones in your hands. Cables run like tree routes through the earth below our feet and into the walls around us carrying this electricity.

This electrical phantom sonic limb is a listening aid to think about our deep reach beyond this urban centre, beyond its limits and surfaces. Feel it on your body, listen

³ I visited the Tsonami Festival in December 2022 and this is where my thinking on the expanded urban within the Anthropocene context began.

⁴ [Richard Mosse's video installation Broken Spectre](#) is a moving artwork about the Brazilian Amazon showing cattle rearing and water pollution amongst many other things.

⁵ The Tsonami Festival is dedicated to the exploration of urban sound, I am inspired by both the curation and the artworks but I specifically mention the [audio intervention](#) work of [Campo Modulado](#).

⁶ Matthew Parker references this sub aquatic data centre in an *Introduction to [Sonic Urbanism: Listening to Non-Human Life](#)*.

with it, listen for it in your surroundings, think with it. See what it feels like to emit this sound.



It's time to walk

Carrying this sound, walk away from the centre of the city towards Mr Phung Asia Markt, there is a resonant walkway by the entrance that is your next location.

Location 2: The entrance to Mr Phung Asia Markt



Tunnel

Turn off your sound when you arrive in the tunnel outside Mr Phung Asia Markt.
Read to yourself:

When reading about the anthropocene I came across the work of Kate Wright, an environmental humanities researcher who described the anthropocene so vividly. She said that our problem was the idea of human exceptionalism - that we think of ourselves as separate to everything else. She gives an example of a photograph showing two boys with their hair standing on end, smiling into the camera marvelling at the strange phenomenon but not realising that they were about to be struck by lightning and that their hair was the warning sign. She says of this "how tragic and dangerous the cognitive illusion of human exceptionalism can be. We can never disconnect from Earth's ecological community".⁷

We are indeed animals, part of the same environment as all other living things but we can at times be disconnected from it. The city is an excellent place to think about this as it is a visual and physical reminder of this separation, available in the constructed floors and walls, in the architecture of inhabitation all around us.

To think about this human exceptionalism your next phantom sonic limb is an extra arm, one that clicks and claps and makes itself heard. This is now part of your sounding body that makes contact with the world around you. I invite you to listen to yourself reflected. Try not to listen to the click or clap but listen to its echo or resonance sounding back at you. Hear yourself sound with the space.

We do not exist separately from our world, we exist together with everything else.

⁷ This is from Kate Wright's text *Becoming With* that you can read here:
<https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/5/1/277/8177/Becoming-with>



Play from your speaker:



It's time to walk

Carrying your sound, walk away from the centre of the city towards Bürger Park. There is another tunnel / resonant walkway immediately after you leave this one, explore it. Stop on the red benches after crossing the River Oker bridge..

Location 3: Red Benches by River Oker bridge



Tram lines

On arrival, turn off your sound and read to yourself:

We are moving further away from the epicentre of this human living, leaving the centre of the city and walking out towards the so-called edge of human concentration.

The air and water around you carries so many human things in its channels and streams, things that are often outside of our perception like inaudible frequencies and imperceptible pollutants.

Yet humans don't live in the air or water and so neither of these spaces would ever be considered as urban or as a site of human concentration, however human presence dominates these places too. The air alone is filled with the transmission of WiFi, Bluetooth and satellite signals amongst many many others. Our mobile phones emit and rely on these signals, as do the trams, the cars and their GPS devices.⁸ Electromagnetic frequency diagrams show our complete occupation of those vibrations of the air. We are currently breathing in fine fine particles that we cannot see but that damages our bodies. In another project I turn these particles into sound for people to listen to and I've heard the pollution travel in concentrated streams through the air, knowing that it comes from both hyper-local and far distant sources.⁹ The air is very much a human territory too in terms of our concentration found there.

Your next phantom sonic limb is an antenna, one that sits in the air like a giant net above you listening to everything that flows through it. It catches electromagnetic signals, waves that proliferate in the air all around us. It is a recording taken from a radio that I made with a collective I am part of.¹⁰ These radios cannot be tuned into a specific radio station but rather they listen broadly to the electromagnetic landscape all around us. They let us hear the thickness of the air that is filled with

⁸ I first began to think of the air as an extension to urban living when encountering [Anna Friz and Absolute Value of Noises work at Tsonami Festival](#).

⁹ At The Bicrophonic Research Institute we sonify air pollution for bike riders to listen to using the [Enviro Bike](#). In two commissions for arts festivals I learnt a lot about the air: [Lisboa Soa Festival 2020](#) and [Sonic Arts Week 202](#)

¹⁰ I'm a member of the Shortwave collective. I took this radio recording as part of a large project for Radio Art Zone, a 22 hours broadcast sharing our listenings. It was taken at sunset on the summer solstice in Scotland, 2022.

both human radio signals and natural radio signals.¹¹ They let us hear the whole environment, us as part of the mix rather than in a separate channel of human exceptionalism.

Have patience listening to the static, this is not noise to be ignored but natural radio emissions, the crackles and clicks are lighting strikes around the world that give off electromagnetic frequencies. You'll hear the human transmissions come and go in waves, demonstrating how they are just strands of this gaseous space that waft in and out.



Play sound from your speaker:



Choose any of the three tracks. If you are doing this in a group, each person should select a different track.

Listen to these sounds while staying still so that you can feel the transmissions moving overhead.



It's time to walk

Turn off your sound and continue walking away from the urban centre, walk into Bürger Park listening to your surroundings and find a place to sit.

¹¹ The radios we make are called Open Wave-Receivers, [you can make your own following this guide](#).

Location 4: Bürger Park



An urban park

Read to yourself:

Our final location is here in an urban park, a space for nature. Yet just like the city this land was also cleared and scraped, grass seed was sowed, trees were planted in lines and pathways rolled out. While I like to spend time in parks all I can see now is another part of a constructed city, just one that is made primarily from nature rather than of concrete and stone, another part of the city that has been planned and provided primarily for human living. While there is much more space for other living things here, this is still a human priority habitat, we decide when to mow the lawn, spray the chemicals and which animals are welcome.



Play sound from your speaker:



Choose any of the three tracks. If you are doing this in a group, each person should select a different track.



While the sound plays, stay still and read to yourself:

Urban parks make me think out to beyond the city limits, to those rural farming spaces that lie beyond. I've begun to think of those spaces as I do these parks, as locations that we have drastically altered for human living. While we might live in a lesser human concentration there, the concentration of human living is still vast, felt for example in the mono culture of plants that we designate may grow there (just 10 crops provide over half the world's food). My thoughts drift again into wilderness spaces, places where by definition we don't live in concentration. In Germany wilderness makes up just 0.6% of the country's land. In the UK, my home,

they have not even calculated this figure to my knowledge. But is it truly wild when there's a fence around a wilderness area, when it exists in such small doses? Our polluted air travels there too, our plastic particles lodged deep in the guts of other bodies.

Your last phantom sonic limb plays the sound of nature, an idealised joyous nature that sounds in abundance but seemingly without us. Hearing nature is always preferably done without human sounds too, without cars, engines and voices. But this is so rarely achieved because we are everywhere ... crouched next to the microphone, flying overhead, driving or talking somewhere in the sonic vicinity. This recording is a false idea of a sonic wilderness, one that we are seemingly not a part of. This recording was made in London by the river Thames, a city housing nine million people, absolutely not a remote wild area. It was recorded during the pandemic within the first lockdown, a time when humans remained indoors and marvelled at nature reclaiming the cities outside of our windows. It was a time when nature was heard seemingly without us, and while this recording catches mainly the sound of birds and ducks it also captures occasional human activities too. I don't offer this recording as a solution, of silencing all humans, but rather as another way that we can hear the idea of human exceptionalism. That we prefer not to hear both the birds and ourselves together.

I wanted to leave you with one final quote from Kate Wright "Failing to attend to ecological connectivities does not break them, but leaves them disfigured. These neglected connections hang in the air, like exposed faulty wiring, pulsing with a deadly charge".¹²

At this location I found myself standing underneath tall trees filled with white fluff. The fluff would break away and travel slowly through the air. The floor I stood on was a carpet of white. Even when the air was thick with heavy rain this fluff continued to float through the air as if it was in another time and space dimension all of its own.



Continue listening to the sound for a few more minutes

¹² This is from Kate Wright's text *Becoming With* that you can read here: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/5/1/277/8177/Becoming-with>