

Cara: Welcome to Ludo Sounds on Entree Radio. In our first episode, we will be talking to Thora Dolven Balke about her practice and her explorations into sound.

*EXCERPT: Sound Sketch 1 ***

Thora: What I really want to do with sound, is I would like to work with sound in a more documentary way—almost as one would work with film. In a way, I would really like to become a documentary sound maker...

*EXCERPT: Sound Sketch 2 ***

I just sang in my friends wedding, this stev, which is this old Norwegian story-telling that you have different— like for a wedding you have a stev which is sort of a loop of melody and rhythm, and then one verse for each. But it's passed down. My mother always does it, so I did it in this wedding because she does it because it is passed down through generations. I'm trying to learn it, and I made it slightly different, and then I'll pass it on again. But that's sort of gone. I mean, I tried to find archives of stev online, and there were almost none which is quite interesting. But it's the same with joik too, the Sami joik, that you don't joik about something, you joik the thing itself. So it sort of has to be, the song sort of has to be the thing, you are conjuring it somehow with the song that you're singing. That is the idea of the song, and then you pass—for example you have a joik of Grandmother—and that's her joik, this one Grandmother, and then it's passed on through the family so that three generations down they can sing her joik, conjure her somehow with the song which is really beautiful.

EXCERPT: Máret inggá Eli Jeanette joiking her grandchild

One thing which I have been thinking a lot about which we discussed too, is to repeat this composition of sounds that you are familiar with and be confronted with them again is almost like, somehow traps time or something. Even when I sang this stev, it has this melody that is very old Norwegian in structure somehow, almost like a lullaby. Those tonalities touch anyone who is familiar with that kind of tonality very deeply.

What it is about sound that so profoundly puts you back in time to when you heard it the first time or when it made an impression on you, it's just filled with so many memories more than just the audible one, it's just filled with all these sensory memories or something...

Like you say, my work is often very equal to my life somehow, it just follows it very closely— whether it be through personal tragedies, or just life changing events, or just thinking about something new and following the track of it, but I think the way I have used a camera all the time is to always be documenting and then later to be filtering it and then seeing what is not just personal, but also has some relevance to other people. But sound, it's such a nice thing to move from camera to sound, which I guess I have always done anyway but it's so amazing to think about it in a visual way. Like come from documenting with a camera all the time and then to be documenting with sound as a very parallel thing. Like I am always recording with a video camera, and always recording sound, and it's just nice to think about them side by side. The times I have filmed people talking I guess it's just a matter of me being able to stay in the moment and then them being able to stay in the moment too. Mostly when I film, I don't film people's faces that much, I more document bigger picture and so I'm not really exposing anyone in that way... and with sound, I mean I did record for months in New York with those binaural headphones people's conversations, absolutely, but in no way will they be exposed as themselves.

EXCERPT: Subway Singing (binaural recording)

I just think it's interesting when you see footage of Berlin in the 1940s or something, you know just people filming everywhere, just the streets, and you think wow, that's how it looked like back then. I thought of these recordings being somehow just of a time or so—oh that's what it sounded back then—everyone was talking. Because everyone is talking out loud so much because they're on the phone all the time too. I was just thinking about how people communicate, how they just don't think about—and I mean here I am abusing this beautiful fact—but the trust people have in a way as they have their conversations openly into the world.

EXCERPT: Hike and Seek (binaural recording)

Since we're talking, in Berlin now because this apartment is right on the river, all night especially in the summer, it's sort of like Disney World around this place, but sort of a rave Disney World, a techno party Disney World. I mean there is so much sound, and it's all traveling across the river. You can hear people talking, you can hear music playing from over there, and it's mixing with music over there... it's a really amazing soundscape and it's something I always remember from this place when I am not here and coming back that is this place.

EXCERPT: Recording of Berlin from Thora's apartment balcony

I thought a lot about it after you left, just that way of doing something...because I mean you came and it was very intuitive and then we talked so much about not actually making a finished project or product that was going to be something specific but to do together and I thought that was very inspiring for the rest of the summer and still to think together while doing without thinking "this will be our end goal". To learn for example just a program, or just to talk and walk and record and then to process straight afterwards—very valuable and a really amazing thing to do. The value of that kind of collaboration and collaborative thinking is really really nice and to somehow archive that. How do you archive that without it being like "this is an end product" or "this is the work we made" but more the whole process of that happening. I thought that was a really interesting thing to think about. Also now with this foundation that I am now the chairwoman of board for, where I think it could be very nice if people come there and think and just leave the remnants of their thinking somehow in the archives so the next person just come and pick it up. Not necessarily to continue working on it even, but just be surrounded by it somehow and that can be the growing archive of like a scientist's notes and then a musician's snippets of conversation or even a finished piece.

EXCERPT: "EYE" - Thora Dolven Balke (2015)

Birds for example can not just mimic other birds, or mimic a cry, or give their own call, but they can also make the illusion of space in their voice. They can call out as if they were, really far away, or really close to you. All the birds in London have the craziest combinations of mobile phone sounds, all the new "eer err", the clicking.... 50 years ago they wouldn't have had any of those sounds.

Werner Herzog has this amazing clip online, where he talks about the jungle—it is one of my favorite Youtube clips of all time...he says "you know, people say the jungle is so romantic, and beautiful, and fantastic, but it's just asphyxiation, fornication, and rotting away and it's like the land that god never finished, it's unfinished"

EXCERPT: Blackbird mimicking phone ringer

EXCERPT: Werner Herzog interviewed during the making of "Fitzcarraldo"

“Of course we are challenging nature itself and it hits back, it just hits back that’s all, and that’s grandiose about it and have to accept that is much stronger than we are. Kinski always says it’s full of erotic elements, I don’t see it so much erotic, I see it more full of obscenity, it’s just... nature here is vile and base...I wouldn’t see anything erotic here, I would see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and, just rotting away. Of course there is a lot of misery, but it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don’t think they sing, they just screech in pain. [...] Of all this jungle, we in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like, badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out a stupid, suburban novel... a cheap novel. And we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order—even the stars appear in the sky appear like a mess”

T: When I came to Rio, I kind of felt it a bit like that. Suddenly you are surrounded by all this life and death somehow. It’s so tropical, so it’s all happening, around you which such force all the time and coming from a place where you maybe you have a moose that wanders across the horizon, or, like one fox... that made a very big impression on me...I was in a bit of a weird state to begin with. But then I heard that insect and my friend said “oh yeah, those insects, you know they sing once and thats when they try to mate and its also the day they die”. So its sort of like they call, hopefully they mate, either way they die. And that’s their last call.

EXCERPT: “Song” - Thora Dolven Balke

T: I had only got one recording of it really, because it would only really sing as the sun was setting and rising and I was only on the island for a couple of days. Just those early morning hours, there’s just so much sound happening, like when the sun is just coming up before it gets too hot. And as this was an island, the sea is very close so you can constantly hear the sea. When I had the final recording, there were a lot of frequencies that are very similar to this one frequency. So the work itself is the recording of this insect and it sorts of fades the frequencies to try to capture just this one tone. In a way, it’s more about just attempting to listening to it.

The sounds of rocks is really an incredible sound. I mean, I’ve always love the Henning Christiansen’s Stone Symphony—I don’t think we ever listened to that. where I think he’s just throwing stones through a metal tube or plate, and the composition is just that. But I have always loved that work so much.

EXCERPT: “Stone Song” - Henning Christiansen

Maybe just because of the force and power of those rocks, even just playing them on the pads, or replaying those sounds had such a physical aspect to it.

*EXCERPT: Rock Field Recordings ***

EXCERPT: “EYE” - Thora Dolven Balke

I used to work with—I think told you—with audiobooks, and recently I have been working with Ben, the actor

EXCERPT: ‘Baby Lie Down’ sample

And then its this situation when these people are professional at it, and they are used to it. And then its a very interesting process of going over it several times, and making them get more and more comfortable. I think that is a really interesting process—the uncomfortableness of something until it gets comfortable. I think that transition is really nice too. Just to stay in something for a longer time and then you get somewhere. The times I have filmed people talking,

which I have done a few times, I guess it's just a matter of me being able to stay in the moment, and them being able to stay in the moment too.

EXCERPT: Recording of Delia Derbyshire's "Amor Dei" played at LIAF - Lofoten International Art Festival (2011)

C: Thank you for listening to Ludo Sounds on Entrée and thank you to Thora for sharing your thoughts and work with us. This podcast is sponsored by the Arts Council, Norway, my name is Cara Stewart and please check out our Soundcloud for more episodes in this series.

** denotes recordings from the making of this series