

On The Great Animal Orchestra Exhibition, inspired by the work of Bernie Krause.

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On The Great Animal Orchestra Exhibition, inspired by the work of Bernie Krause. Fondation Cartier (Paris) from 2 July 2016 to 8 January 2017.¹

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Sound object:

On The Great Animal Orchestra Exhibition, inspired by the work of Bernie Krause. Fondation Cartier (Paris) from 2 July 2016 to 8 January 2017. Exhibition Curator: Hervé Chandès

Including works by: Pierre Bodo, Cai Guo-Qiang, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Raymond Depardon and Claudine Nougaret, Bernie Krause, JP Mika, Manabu Miyazaki, Moke, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Christian Sardet, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Shiro Takatani, TALLER Mauricio Rocha + Gabriela Carrillo, Tara Océans, Cyprien Tokoudagba, United Visual Artists, Agnès Varda, Adriana Varejão.

Bernie Krause (*1938) first made a name for himself at the end of the sixties, as a pioneer in the field of synthesizers. Together with Paul Beaver (1926–1975), he produced several records and took part in numerous studio sessions, in particular in the rock music world, amongst others for The Byrds and The Doors (cf. Pinch and Trocco 2002: 107–130). He is also a theoretician and a practitioner of soundscapes. He coined the terms anthrophony and biophony to describe, respectively, the human and natural parts of sound environments, and he has spent the past forty years recording animal fauna and wildlife in the four corners of the world. He regularly combines his recordings with other sources of sound. Since mid-July 2016, an exhibition entitled *The Great Animal Orchestra* has been paying tribute to him in Paris, and I will here be discussing this event, its layout and its philosophy.

A Powerfully Oneiric Set-Up

With the exception of an installation in the garden by filmmaker Agnès Varda, the exhibition mainly occupies the ground floor and basement of the Fondation Cartier. On the ground floor, the rooms are bathed in natural light and not a sound can be heard. Divided into two distinct spaces, this first part includes pictorial works, photos, videos (whose sound can be heard through headphones), paintings, and hybrid works. In the first space, several works of art, such as the enormous fresco by Cai Guo-Qiang, in which animals gather around a body of water, represent groups of animals that seem to be in conversation. Several works document precisely this society whose existence we are unaware of. This is the case of the photographs of Manabu Miyazaki which, using cameras that are set off automatically, show us the constant nighttime ballet of wild animals on a path used by ramblers during the day. Other shots – close-ups of flying jays in which we see their eyes, a bear playing with one of Miyazaki's cameras – personalize the animals, endowing them with a character and intentions. In the second space, the extraordinary and highly farcical nuptial ballets and singing of birds from New Guinea suggest to us that music is not just human but rather – this is an idea close to Krause's heart – has its origins in the animal kingdom. This hypothesis is also put forward by the fantastic paintings of Beninese artist Cyprien Tokoudagba and the Congolese Pierre Bodo, JP Mika and Moke, in which hybrid, half-animal half-human orchestras play rock music. This second space, which is more playful but also more striking than the first, thus calls into question the difference between the human and animal

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worlds. Not only does animal society live its own life, but on top of this its modes of behaviour make it similar to human society.

In the basement, a first room devoted to the ocean and to plankton includes a series of screens laid out on the floor. At the other end is a space where visitors can hear and listen to Krause's soundscapes. After having passed through a vestibule, visitors find themselves in a very large room in which everyone can take their place as they see fit: stand against a wall, lie down on the carpet, sit down on a podium. In the half-light, Krause's soundscapes ring out and play one after the other, every twelve minutes exactly. Thanks to a multi-channel public address system, the soundscapes wrap around the whole room, and everyone in it. Every new sequence is announced by a video projection which describes in which country, which place, under which meteorological conditions, in which season and at what date the recording was carried out. We are constantly changing continent, we move from a pond to the middle of the ocean, from the Tundra to America, from whales to elephants, from birds to mammals, from sky to earth. The texture of the sequences mostly consists of an overall soundscape (for example, a mixture of the wind and of the sound of the sea's backwash), into which specific animals come and insert themselves before leaving again. Through the succession of these sound biotopes, Krause allows us to hear the sound of the earth.

The United Visual Artists (UVA) group has created a system which transposes Krause's soundscapes into flows of light, and projects them onto the walls of the room. On the first wall, light signals react to the dynamics of the music, a little like a modulation meter. On the other two walls, light waves similar to audio waves move from left to right in rhythm with the music, with each specific animal sound being announced by a text inserted into the flow of light. This system literally allows us to visualize the sound and to discern, in the background, the various (groups of) animals that are occupying the space. Whether you close your eyes to melt into the soundscape or observe the flow of light on the walls/screens, this makes for an intense sensorial experience. Everybody who has been to see the exhibition agrees: they experience the same feeling of immersion, of the beauty of these sound maps, and the awareness that many of them are now the only remaining evidence of worlds that have been consumed by the urbanization of our planet and by global warming. In fact, the secret, hallucinated and hybrid world of the ground floor unfolds in our ears and on the screens of the basement, the diversity of species is revealed by the variety of cries, songs, dynamics, by constantly renewed musical ensembles, solos and dialogues. While on the ground floor the proximity between humans and animals was suggested by representations, here it is through being immersed in the soundscapes that the visitors/human beings dive into the hearts of ecosystems and see their different components and interactions, as though they themselves were a part of them.

Sound-thropocene: a Politics of Sound

Many authors highlight how difficult it is to represent the anthropocene and its consequences: climate breakdown, the extinction of species, ocean acidification. Even if, from the perspective of geological time, the phenomenon has come about very fast, the spaces within which it unfolds are too vast, and its timescales too long, for any individual human being to really be able to perceive them (cf. for instance Clark 2015). It is only if we directly experience an extreme episode, or when the media shows us areas that are breaking down (melting sea ice, for example) that we grasp the concrete consequences of the anthropocene. The point of Krause's work and of the design of this exhibition is precisely to allow us to see and hear, i.e. to physically experience this incredible phenomenon (in the sense of something that cannot be imagined). But rather than showing us devastated valleys that have been emptied of their wildlife, rather than making us listen to the silence of polluted areas, Krause offers to immerse us in the soundscapes that he has

been collecting for several decades, and to allow us to perceive their diversity and aesthetic beauty. The originality of this set-up is thus to make us understand that a large part of these worlds have disappeared *because we can hear recordings of them*. Krause's Sublime (cf. on this topic Brady 2013 and Guenin 2016) is thus neither the spectacle of unleashed elements that was so admired by the Romantics, nor the representation of current ecological disasters – it is the aural trace of the wild. This is without doubt an original ecological aesthetics and a highly efficient policy of sound, since anybody can experience it, whatever their age, language or nation.

Furthermore, the other remarkable point is linked to the fundamentally ambivalent status of “nature” in this exhibition. Even if many works on the ground floor more or less explicitly suggest that the fauna, flora and the animal world live and coexist separately from human beings, other pictorial installations and Krause's soundscapes conversely insist on the interpenetration between human beings, animals and the elements. In the manner of the hybrid orchestras on the ground floor, being immersed in Krause's soundscapes sort of turns us into animals, or at least it mixes us in with them. Surrounded by sounds, we are not so much in the position of an observer or a sound recordist as at the very heart of the sound ecosystem, tossed around by the waves, carried by the wind like birds, listening to the earth from the perspective of an insect. Even if the exhibition somewhat puts forward the idea of an autonomous, wild nature, the experience that we have of it strengthens the animism that is implicit in many of the works and installations on the ground floor; there is indeed a continuity between “us” and the animals, and this continuity means that we are animals just as much as animals are humans. The work of Krause, who has spent his life mixing instruments and outdoor sound recordings, makes this clear: if music bursts out of any place, it is not just because human beings interpret sounds as music, but also because the animal world and the earth itself are musicians. We know that Timothy Morton (2007) has wished for an ecology without nature – this is what we have in this great orchestra of animals which will without doubt go down in art history.

For more information:

Exhibition Catalogue:

Krause, Bernie, and Hervé Chandès (ed.). 2016. *The Great Animal Orchestra*. Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain.

Interactive Exhibition Website:

<http://www.legrandorchestredesanimaux.com/fr>

The Underground of the Exhibition:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTMLqySt6oU>

Website of *Wild Sanctuary*, Bernie Krause's organisation:

<http://www.wildsanctuary.com/>

Records by Beaver and Krause:

<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/beaver-krause-mn0000162728>

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