In his “Small History Of Photography”, Walter Benjamin quotes Bertolt Brecht: “A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional.” But what could a sound recording tell us? This is one of the questions that Ernst Karel’s Materials Recovery Facility, recently published online by the interdisciplinary journal Sensate, addresses. The piece was constructed from field recordings made in a single-stream recycling plant in Charlestown, Massachusetts, where all kinds of recyclable materials are sorted and processed. “This kind of facility exists,” he says, “because many people around here, it seems, can’t be trusted to sort recyclable materials themselves. If people are able to throw all recyclable materials together into the same bin, it turns out that they’re more likely to recycle.”

Even though it costs more, authorities stump up for single-stream recycling, because it is at least cheaper than sending materials to landfill. “So the whole existence of these huge facilities can be seen as a testament of a human failing,” says Karel.

The plant contains highly sophisticated equipment to process the materials, but a large population of human workers does much of the actual sorting. Thus a whole network of social relations lies behind, and is implied by, the rumble of conveyor belts, the background clank of engines, the clunk of workers’ boots on catwalks, the clank and crunch of rubbish as it’s sorted or fished out. Although it was recorded in quadraphonic sound, the final stereo version of the work has a wide spatial and dynamic range. The listener streams the recording via the embedded media player on the Sensate website, which also contains Karel’s contextualising notes, although he says that listening to the recording without consulting the notes means “the audience is given the opportunity to derive meaning in their own way”.

Karel suggests an affinity between his field recordings and his ongoing work as an improviser: he played trumpet and electronics in Noise groups like Blowhole, and later, in Chicago and elsewhere, with Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jeb Bishop, Jeff Parker, Kevin Drumm and Toshimaru Nakamura among others. “The microphones are the instrument,” he says. “While recording, rather than just finding an interesting spot, pressing record, recording for a while and then pressing stop, I generally keep the recorder running, and perform the recording – creating transitions, beginnings and endings in the process of recording itself.”

Although Karel says that Materials Recovery Facility isn’t a work of sonic anthropology, his approach to field recording has its roots in his academic training in that field. He says he is now “much more interested in making sound pieces that stand alone as sound pieces”, but the notion of understanding the world through sound – what the ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, also a contributor to Sensate, calls acoustemology – is still an important one. Karel’s recordings of birds flocking on mountains of domestic waste sounds lovely, but it is also a document of a landscape ravaged by human activity.

Recording estranges lived experience; by isolating sound’s aesthetic qualities, it makes it possible to think historically about what lies behind them. Karel explains: “These are the sounds of a very specific human situation, a specific point in the history of civilisation. Wrapped up in them is a complex story that one could take in any number of directions: the development and production of these complex materials in the first place, and all the resources that go into that; what the materials are used for; human behaviours and tendencies concerning what to do with these materials after they’ve been used; analyses of those behaviours; and strategies devised to address them.” sensatejournal.com, ek.klingt.org

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