

## Enemy Ecologies

### Afterword

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### Abstract

*This article is about how artistic responses to climate crisis – especially in sound art – can end up reproducing the capitalist dynamic they seek to critique. Building on the idea of enemy feminisms, I ask about the possibility of enemy ecologies: ecological forms and practices that present themselves as critical and freeing while remaining consonant with dominant economic logics. Drawing on a variety of examples, I question the assumed political efficacy of some relational philosophies and affective mediations. The point is not to reject such practices. Instead, it is to develop an immanent critique that addresses their internal contradictions and to ask how sound art might compose publics capable of confronting ecological crisis rather than (unintentionally) accommodating it.*

*Cet article examine comment les réponses artistiques à la crise climatique – en particulier dans l'art sonore – peuvent en venir à reproduire les dynamiques capitalistes qu'elles cherchent à critiquer. En m'appuyant sur l'idée de féminismes ennemis, je propose d'interroger la possibilité d'écologies ennemies: des formes et les pratiques écologiques qui se présentent comme critiques et libératrices tout en restant en accord avec les logiques économiques dominantes. À partir de divers exemples, je remets en question l'efficacité politique supposée de certaines philosophies relationnelles et médiations affectives. Il ne s'agit pas de rejeter ces pratiques, mais de développer une critique immanente qui en analyse les contradictions internes, et de se demander comment l'art sonore pourrait composer des publics capables d'affronter la crise écologique plutôt que de l'accommoder (involontairement).*

*Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie künstlerische Reaktionen auf die Klimakrise – insbesondere in der Klangkunst – die kapitalistischen Strukturen, die sie kritisieren wollen, ungewollt reproduzieren können. Ausgehend von der Idee „feindlicher Feminismen“ stelle ich die Frage nach der Möglichkeit „feindlicher Dynamiken“: ökologischer Formen und Praktiken, die sich als kritisch und befreiend darstellen, dabei jedoch mit dominanten*

*ökonomischen Logiken im Einklang bleiben. Anhand verschiedener Beispiele hinterfrage ich die vermeintliche politische Wirksamkeit bestimmter Philosophien und affektiver Vermittlung. Ziel ist es nicht, solche Praktiken grundsätzlich abzulehnen. Vielmehr geht es um eine immanente Kritik, die ihre inneren Widersprüche aufzeigt, und um die Frage, wie Klangkunst Öffentlichkeiten schaffen kann, die in der Lage sind, der ökologischen Krise entgegenzutreten – statt sie (ungewollt) zu begünstigen.*

## Keywords

**sound art, climate crisis, capital, enemy ecologies, immanent critique**

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The concert was breathtaking.

Everything begins bathed in ultramarine, glacial blue, like an iceberg submerged. Piano strings cut the predawn silence against a backdrop of stars and meteors, echoed by orchestral swells. Sun and song rise, giving way to lyric and light, thundering electronic drums, synthetic zaps. Gradually, the climate changes. Winter melts. Artificial intelligence generates evolving, dreamlike visuals over a medley of classical and contemporary musical arrangements while seafaring animals morph under aurora australis, like a monumental movie soundtrack for a grandiloquent screensaver, the whole spectacle set to lyrical reminders of how beauty holds the hand of sorrow, how today outshines tomorrow.

It is an immersive musical and visual experience that evokes the majesty – and vulnerability – of the planet's south pole. The concert is the finale in a series of artistic events curated to inspire collective responsibility for the future of the earth: Red Sea coral reefs, Amazon rainforests, Sahara deserts, and, now, Antarctic glaciers. The goal of the performances, according to their curator, “is to make these global challenges seem personal”. He continues: “Through art, we can bridge divides and spark the kind of empathy and understanding that lead to real solutions” (Waga 2025). In blending “electronic sounds and classical music with cutting-edge technology”, especially technology that visualizes climate data using generative artificial intelligence, the performance “becomes emotionally charged, resonating deeply with us”. It is a fusion that “connects both our hearts and minds, amplifying the urgency of the climate crisis and creating a profound, lasting impact that stirs our emotions and drives us to act” (Fowler 2025).

A breathtaking concert – and an inspiring message about the catalytic hybridity of art and technology, humans and nature, awareness and action.

I was not in the audience for this concert. The performance took place in Davos, Switzerland as part of the opening ceremony for the 2025 meeting of the World Economic Forum. I saw it online – and, not that my own horizons of enjoyment matter at all here, but the concert did not take my breath away. My description and explanation are com-

piled from the World Economic Forum's website and *Forbes* magazine, the former authored by the Forum's Head of Arts and Culture, the latter by an influencer who writes about "conscious luxury".

The World Economic Forum is among this planet's capitalist strongholds. It is a zealot for an economic theology that says the mode of production that has given us the climate crisis is the same one that will deliver us from that crisis. In addition to hardcore economics, the World Economic Forum clearly believes in harnessing the softer power of culture, the arts, music, the humanities. It believes these realms of resonance, relationality, imagination, and emotion are missing links between climate awareness and climate action.

This sounds inspiring, certainly. What does it say, though, that anyone can flip through the ecocritical humanities literature and discover the same basic language, ideas, and beliefs?

In journals like *Resilience*, for example, we encounter another glacial meditation. Katie Paterson's work, in which she records glaciers, presses those recordings into ice, and plays back those records until they melt, is vaunted because "artworks often participate in making the distant effects of climate change sensible to a broader public, provoking open-ended affective responses" (Jue and Ruiz 2020, 178).

In *Environmental Humanities*, we find the work of Tania Candiani. Candiani turns the dead and buried rivers of Mexico City into data and sonifies that data in the form of music boxes. Her work is held up because it can "deepen awareness" that environmental issues "are themselves neither exclusively human nor exclusively environmental" (Blackmore 2025, 41). For these reasons, artworks can "make generative contributions to imagining more just relations" (ibid., 23).

Sound artist Jacob Kirkegaard creates installations out of recordings collected by dipping hydrophones into damaged rivers, garbage dumps, and recycling facilities. If his work can "generate a kind of access to waste as opposed to furthering our alienation from it", he hopes "this new 'awareness' may equip us to take action" (Kirkegaard 2022).

The literature scholar turned environmental philosopher Timothy Morton talks about "some kind of shift towards ecological awareness" that he hears in the music of Björk, while the musician herself entertains the agential force of ideas like posthumanism and object oriented ontology. Other forms of popular music, like so-called apocalypse pop, are spoken about in similar ways – albeit from the opposite affective register. The genre expresses a consonant concern about the planet's future, although rather than emotionally spurring people into action, its songs serve as coping mechanisms that equip people for inaction (Behnke 2022). Additional realms of arts and artifacts are described in similar terms. The World Economic Forum itself is equally interested in the climate potential of fashion, fiber, and robo-kinetic biofeedback digital sculptures (among others), while researchers view photographers like Fabrice Monteiro as representatives of a movement in African ecomedia that can "catalyze ecological consequences in the form of environmental degradation and/or advocacy for environmental awareness" (Iheka 2021, 6).

The list goes on, and it could include articles in the current issue of this journal by Simon Chioini and Myriam Boucher as well as Martina Fladerer. Different as these two rich and rewarding articles are – one offers a methodology for creating site-specific sound artworks that foster a relational understanding of a person's place in the world, the other offers a conceptual survey of existing sound artworks that foster communities of care and relations of reciprocity across cultural and natural divides – they do share some themes.

There is an emphasis on participatory, processual practices, on relationality and becoming, on mutuality and multiplicity. There is an interrogation of individualism and anthropocentrism. There is attention to the connection between ethics and aesthetics, to sound and music powerful tools for mediating ecological ways of living. There is conviction about the mediating role of music and sound as speculative tools for imagining alternatives and enacting change in a moment of environmental crisis, for remaking how we think and live together, for rehearsing new ecological and social imaginaries. There is recognition that the environmental crisis necessitating all this is an effect of capitalism, both concretely and conceptually.

All of which, for me, raises questions. How can this set of ideas about music, the arts, and the humanities simultaneously serve those who believe capital is the solution to climate crisis, and those who know it is the problem? Why do these instincts present themselves as so self-evidently good and true to people like us, and people like them, in our times and places? Why are these cultural appetites, beliefs, and strategies so appealing to both capitalists and artists? How might those projects coincide?

Sophie Lewis has an idea that can help answer these questions. Lewis writes about something she calls enemy feminisms. These are forms of feminism that robe themselves in the cloth of liberation, and which are, on some level, actual and existing feminisms, but which also deviate from (and interfere with) feminism's core emancipatory mission. There are conservative, reactionary branches of feminism, like girlboss feminism and policewoman feminism and trans-exclusionary feminism. There are racist feminisms. Classist ones, too. None of this is up for debate, according to Lewis. "The jury really is in", she writes. "Middle- and upper-class ladies (especially) participated *feministly* in racial domination on a planetary scale." It is "only by facing these truths", Lewis says, that feminism can "become accountable to itself, and thrive" (Lewis 2025).

Are there enemy ecologies in our midst? I think so. Enemy ecologies tell us that ethical consumption is the path to environmental conservation, even though there are no personal solutions to the social problems of economic production or climate crisis. They tell us that solving the climate crisis begins with the self, the local, the smallest step – and that all our individual acts are the start of something bigger – even though such incrementalism is a better explanation for the status quo than its disruption. They tell us that the climate crisis is simply an engineering challenge or a market failure, with correspondingly benign technical and institutional tweaks, which capital is fully capable of providing, when the evidence shows capital cannot be the solution to its own

problems. Enemy ecologies also tell us the climate crisis is a failure of awareness, imagination, feeling, and culture, when in reality there has never been more awareness about climate crisis, never more imaginative and affecting works of art drawing attention to the crisis, never more cultural emphasis on that crisis – yet the actual condition of the climate is worse than ever.

It would be unfeeling to suggest that the articles in this issue of the journal (and the sound arts they describe) are enemy ecologies. I appreciate their methods, ideas, works. I am equally convinced that it is worth continuing to push our critical thinking in relation to all this, that it is worth staying with this trouble, not least because the cultural logic of a given moment does tend to symbolize and secure the social organization of its economy.

I will focus here on one of the strongest themes across the two articles, widespread as it also is in contemporary musical thought and scholarship, which is an embrace of broadly relational philosophies of thinking-with and making kin in the most inclusive sense. Such philosophies often set themselves against a foil of earlier ways of thinking and being from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, where social life and social progress were organized around reason and rationalization, the control and domination of natural and social others, the absolute separation of human and nonhuman existence. The effects of these operational protocols, in social and environmental terms, are known. A variety of other philosophies, from the twentieth century into the twenty-first, have therefore sought life and progress in equal but opposite realms – in the realms of feeling and affect, in becoming with natural and social others, in the multiple ontological entanglements of nature and culture, humans and nonhumans.

Jan Overwijk (2025) describes the broad contours of this history as a shift from a sociology of closure to a sociology of openness. Yet for all the ways the sociology of openness attempts to achieve escape velocity from capital (and even sometimes appears to do so) it has always orbited capital and reproduced it (albeit in strange new ways). Overwijk shows how the sociology of openness is neither a critique of capital nor a shift away from it, but a transformation within capital.

Paul Rekret offers a related critique with regard to field recordings and soundscape techniques in popular song and sound art. Rekret's perspective is resonant with the critical perspectives in the articles of this issue, although he pushes further. Rekret questions how "claims for overcoming dualist conceptions of humanity and nature at the level of subjective affect, ontological entanglement, or hybridity upon which the reception of environmental field recording are premised, overlook a whole history of real interactions that constitute and reinforce the categories of nature and culture in the first place" (Rekret 2024, 137-138).

In other words, Rekret asks us to look closely at the scaffolding of even our most well-intentioned acoustic interventions. What are the conditions that allow something like sound art to be true and possible for us in the first place? Why can those truths and those possibilities be equally at home among the capitalists and the artists? Why do

these artifacts and ideas harmonize in contemporary art worlds as well as global economic forums? The answer is not necessarily that sound art and its philosophies of imagination and hybridity are enemy ecologies. However, the situation does suggest, on some level, that sonic arts – even and especially the most apparently open, critical, and relational sound art methods, ideas, and practices – do not always pose a serious threat to capital accumulation, which is the source of the problem they profess to address.

When it comes to our ecological crisis, Martina Fladerer wants to “avoid falling into a general illusion about what the arts can achieve” and she wants to work out “which kind of music mediation could actually make a difference”. She asks: “What connections do we make? What relationships do we create?” Simon Chioini and Myriam Boucher, meanwhile, propose a sound methodology that “seeks to initiate a public” which would “reexamine their relation to the environment and the places that surround them”.

These are the right questions and the right instincts. They ask us to think seriously about how mediation works, not just as a channel between publics and artworks, but as something embedded in audiences and artifacts as such. This calls to mind thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Kittler, Georgina Born, and Antoine Hennion. Different as these figures are, one commonality is that mediation, for them, is not necessarily what comes in the middle, what bridges, what channels, what connects. It is not just a relationship between things that already exist, not just what happens between an object and the people it is brought to. Mediation is in things themselves.

Mediation therefore requires a concept like immanent critique. For Moishe Postone (1993), critique has to arise from within the logic of the phenomenon it interrogates – not from some external position, but from an unfolding contradiction within the phenomenon’s own conditions of possibility. What if sound art’s particular commitment to relationality is one such contradiction? What if the very things that make all this so appealing, the concepts that make it feel so urgent and political, are also what nudge it toward the realm of enemy ecologies, allowing it to circulate safely in spaces and among publics where it ought to be antithetical? And what would such antithetical, immanently critical sound arts be like? What publics might they compose?

After Davos, these are the questions I’m left grappling with.

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## Author Biography

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