# Stephen Vitiello: *Tetrasomia*

Interview with Stephen Vitiello by Sara Tucker:

For years Stephen Vitiello has focused on sounds that might be called ambient, environmental or incidental. His work has combined field recordings with digital processing to create slowly evolving, sonically-rich soundscapes. For example, the first track on his CD *Light of Falling Cars* is composed from manipulated sounds of a paper cutter. In other works, Vitiello has sought to reveal sounds that, in a given space, are ambient or inaudible, sounds that might exist just beyond the reach of the listener. One example is his 1999 installation atop the World Trade Center, in which he placed contact microphones against the glass windows of a 91st-floor office to amplify exterior noises that were otherwise unheard but implied by the view. Vitiello's intention was to increase the phenomenological experience of the space while bringing the visitor to an increased awareness of the building's height and movement as it was affected by wind and other natural and non-natural forces.

When Dia commissioned Vitiello to participate in its series of artists' projects for the web, he looked to the internet as a source and found himself thinking about non-musical sound archives. He soon zeroed in on physical, mostly natural sounds, which he then organized in accordance with the four elements: earth, air, wind, and fire. The resulting work serves as an interactive guide to these sometimes hard-to-find archives. Each site is represented by an audio sample that visitors can turn on or off by clicking as they draw on up to seventeen simultaneous tracks to devise a mix that might include a fruit fly courtship, an underwater volcano, poison frogs, and extracts from the fiery sounds of the Saturn 5 lift-off.

In addition, Vitiello created four new sound pieces generated in part from his collection of found web-based sounds. These compositions can be heard by clicking on icons taken from a Western representation of a Tibetan Stupa.[1] In this cosmology, the elements are ordered from the bottom as Earth, Water, Fire, and Air, with Ether as the fifth element. When a fifth element was included by ancient and medieval civilizations, it was usually described as space and often had a metaphysical dimension. In the nineteenth century, it was widely accepted in physics that a "luminiferous ether" existed-a theoretical, transparent, weightless, undetectable, and universal substance believed to act as the medium for transmission of electromagnetic waves. While this idea was ultimately disproved by Einstein's theory of relativity, it gave rise to the name "Ethernet," the standard for data transmission used by most networks, including the Internet. Bob Metcalfe, its accredited founder, explained "Ethernet was named, on May 22, 1973, for the luminiferous ether...an omnipresent passive medium of the propagation of electromagnetic waves, in our case, Internet packets.[2]"

Vitiello named his project after the ancient Western notion of four elements. The term Tetrasomia refers to the Doctrine of Four Elements written by Empedocles, the fifth-century BC philosopher, who first postulated that all matter is comprised of four "roots," or basic elements. A contemporary notion of "the fifth element" is also present in *Tetrasomia*: its content and context exist in the ether(net).

ST: The sites you chose for this project range from individual hobbyists' personal sound collections to a database containing 25,000 species of orthopteroid insects. How did you select the sites and what drew you to these kinds of sounds? Why did you decide to exclude the fifth element as a category for organizing sounds?

SV: Over the last year or so when I have mentioned to friends or colleagues that I was looking for specific sounds for projects, they would often point me towards the Internet. My expectation was that these sounds would be hard-to-find and low quality. However, recently, when I was working on an installation and wanted sounds of bats my wife, Tracy Leipold, quickly called up several sites with high-quality, diverse recordings of bats from around the world. Michael Lavin, at the Guggenheim Museum, also pointed out sites that feature beautiful, ethereal ground-based ELF-VLF recordings. I started to make lists of sounds that I would like to find, from close-ups of butterfly wings and other flying insects to events like falling rocks and earthquakes. I would then search online to see what I could track down. I was amazed to learn how much is out there and how varied the sites are: postings by amateur bird watchers; documentation by scientists; archives for children to examine various things that make a crackling sound; a religiously-inspired site that collects recordings of thunder; commercial sites that sell sounds as well as non-commercial sites generally sharing more arcane sounds for others to use freely.

For this project I was interested in finding a variety of evocative and well-recorded sounds. At the same time, I wanted to create a reading list of sorts -- links for further listening. I was interested in presenting sites that could introduce the visitor to the web as a sound space, in much the way it has already become a resource for image, text and popular music. Some archives are very personal, perhaps obsessive collections of sounds that few beyond the site host might find interesting. In other cases, they may appeal to larger audiences. Several, including sites with archives of Big Foot or UFO audio recordings, offer instructions on recording technique, suggested equipment, and the locations where one might capture similar sounds.

Several times while working on this project I gave thought to whether to include ether. One idea was to fill it with so-called impossible or improbable nature, such as the Big Foot recordings, perhaps a nature that we imagine rather than one we can be sure exists. Another idea was to put links to other artists' sound projects. I don't have a conclusive answer but I do feel that the presence of natural sounds, supported and kept alive in this non-natural environment suggests an interesting mystery. Where it might be argued that this network and transfer system for information is not at all unearthly, I believe that it exists and continually expands like a universe, in a way that starts to take on its own character and personality.

You were part of the collaboration responsible for Dia's first artist project for the web in 1995, *Fantastic Prayers*. Five years later, how is it different to be working in this medium again?

Few people I knew at that time had adequate access to the web. Far fewer had the proper set up to receive sound or video files. I was told by everyone to keep the sound files very short, highly compressed and at the lowest resolution to conserve bandwidth. I thought of the sound for that site as a kind of punctuation, or a small moment in a cartoon bubble above the head of the core character: the text. *Fantastic Prayers*, as a performance, and now, as a CD-ROM, always treated sound as an element equal to text and image, but in 1995 the web was not capable of that equivalence.

You've done live performances around the world and released several CDs. How does working in a digital, networked space differ from performing in a physical space or making recordings, and how do you think about audience in this medium?

I always start with thinking about context. For a long time, I created soundtracks for experimental film and video. I began by thinking about the images, as well as the intent of the artist and the sound that might emphasize those ideas. When I began making site-specific sound installations, I came to spaces as rooms in which to create soundtracks, looking for existing sounds that would underline and amplify, or that might change, a visitor's perception of space within that environment. For example, I am interested in ways to make a space larger by sound.

My approach to working with the web is not that different. The Internet becomes the space to amplify. In this project I wanted to dig up or unearth specific sounds and then amplify them through the interactive screen as well as through my compositions. Of course, I had to be aware of file sizes, keeping the pieces short so that visitors would not need to wait too long for the download. I also realize that people's patience in realation to a computer is much shorter than, for example, in front of their stereo or in a concert. It seemed clear that the pieces should be kept relatively brief: were these compositions meant for CD release, they would no doubt be longer and evolve more gradually. Creating works to be heard on the web also encourages a conservative use of high and low frequencies. Most people's computers are not able to render sound with a quality equal to that of the home stereo; they remain typically better equipped for higher quality with imagery than with sound.

ST: How did you approach the compositions? And on a continuum from abstraction to representation, where would you locate these pieces?

This quartet of works utilize sounds that were found on the designated sites as a basic palette from which to begin. The combinations of sounds are not dictated by logic, rather they are based on impression and on pleasing combinations. The results may be experienced as abstract, but in my head as I created them each one had its own narrative and its own vocabulary. I find myself attaching names to certain sounds that may not have anything to do with their true origins, but come from the feeling I get from listening to them. I consider these purely personal associations and I don't expect anyone else to pick up on my narratives, but it helps when organizing sounds while imagining how to present an evocative experience, one that might be as rich in associations as any visual counterpart. For example, when creating *Air* I imagined the sounds as if heard from an insect riding on the back of a larger bird as it flies over a dark countryside. You hear close-up scratches and movements of wind and dust bouncing off the bird's wings, as well as long-shot ambient clusters of sounds from the ground below. With *Earth*, I pictured a slow moving animal or insect that moves along the dirt at night, half submerged, listening from the ground, experiencing the bass rumble from unseen events. A short piece for a slow loris' Walkman.

"Truth" in relation to sound is even more subjectively determined than with visual imagery. In creating soundtracks, or sound environments, it is often more important to present the idea of the thing than an actual recording. Foley artists have long known that you do not need documentation of one hundred horses running to give the viewer the sensation of a hundred horses running by. A true recording might seem muddy or too dense or unreadable, whereas a few people clapping their hands knocking coconuts or slippers together into a microphone might give a more persuasive and hence "truer" experience of horses running.

The images used in the interactive screen were all taken from your photographs. What is the relationship between the sound and image here, and what prompted you to make your own, rather than work collaboratively with a visual artist as you have in the past?

For twelve years I worked with visual artists creating soundtracks for their films, videos or installations. It wasn't until I started to create exclusively sound works that I could see myself as an artist in my own right, rather than as an artistic collaborator. I learned a great deal from collaborations but it was important to start to define the landscape myself rather than simply respond to other peoples' frameworks. In the last year I have started to create visual responses to my sound pieces. These have taken the form of video, installation, and now, photography. I shot the photos for this project in Ouro Preto, Brazil, where I was teaching a workshop in sound and image production. While there I also spent time making field recordings relating to the four elements.

When recording audio I would sometimes stop to take photographs. Several of the photos were shot at night, standing alone in darkness. While listening to something I would shoot with a digital still camera, catching whatever the flash managed to find. The combination of chance with knowing that something is there that I cannot see but might feel and can still capture is another way to imagine the presence of the ether.

## Notes:

1. A stupa is a dome-shaped monument used to house Buddhist relics or to commemorate significant facts of Buddhism or Jainism. The graphical representaion of a Tibetan stupa used for this project came from *Dictionary of Symbols*, (Malmö: Merkur International KB, 1991), p. 255.

2. Quoted from an August 20, 2000 email from Bob Metcalfe.

# Stephen Vitiello

Stephen Vitiello's website: www.stephenvitiello.com

**Discography**

*Scratchy Marimba*, 2000 (Sulfur U.S./Sulphur U.K.)
*Fantastic Prayers*, CD ROM in collaboration with Constance De Jong and Tony Oursler, 2000 (Dia Center for the Arts and Prop Foundation)
*Sounds Building in the Fading Light*, 2000 (Creamgardens)
*Uitti/Vitiello*, 1999 (JDK Productions)
*The Light of Falling Cars*, 1998 (JDK Productions)
*Chairs Not Stairs*, 1996 (Stephen Vitiello)
*Enredando as Pessoas (Intriguing People)*, 1995 (EMVIDEO)

**Exhibitions**

Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France 1999
World Trade Center, New York, NY 1999
Postmasters Gallery, 2000
PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2000
Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY, 2000
The Project, New York, NY, 2000

**Bibliography**

Lynne Cooke, "Interview with Tony Oursler, Stephen Vitiello and Constance De Jong," *Tony Oursler*, Kunstverein Hannover, 1999
Rahma Khazam, "Stephen Vitiello's Art of Noises are a moveable feast," *The Wire*, July 1999
Amy Herzog, "Stephen Vitiello," *Greater New York* CD ROM and online catalogue, PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, 2000
Kenneth Goldsmith, "Don't quit your day job" *New Music Box*, The American Music Center, April 2000