As distant and close as can be: lo-fi recording: site-specificity and (in)authenticity

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As distant and close as can be

Lo-fi recording: site-specificity and (in)authenticity

In their recently published ‘top 200 albums of the 2000’s’ list Pitchfork Media states in the review of the album Thunder, Lightning, Strike by The Go! Team, that ‘at the end of the decade, lo-fi had become a fashionable option, a recording approach made less out of necessity than out of fashion.’¹ A telling but slightly elusive statement, since the term ‘lo-fi’ means several things. According to Aden Evens ‘fidelity […] is achieved by the accurate recreation of the same pattern of sound waves at the listener’s body as would have occurred at the body of a listener who was present at the recording,’² which means the higher the fidelity, the more accurate the recording. But, as Matthew Malsky writes, this assumes there is such a thing as ‘a’ performance and the possibility of an accurate recreation of it. He therefore reminds us of the fact that ‘fidelity is based on an ideological assumption that there should, or even could, be a direct correspondence between a live and a reproduced sound.’³ The implicit ideal of hi-fidelity is something like an ultimate accurate recording: one that sounds exactly like the actual event. Lo-fi, or lo-fidelity, is the opposite of this ideal: a recording that does not at all sounds like the original event, for its lack of accuracy, often most poignantly defined by a low signal-to-noise ratio.

But, for Pitchfork, the term lo-fi also refers to a loose genre or conglomerate of genres: artists who deliberately reject the standards of hi-fidelity (polished, crispy, clear, ‘accurate’ sound) and share a recording aesthetic focussed less on the most accurate recording. Opposed to the ideal of absolute transparency of hi-fi, lo-fi aims at non-transparency; it is noisy, ‘inaccurate’ and consciously establishing itself as a recording. Whereas with earlier examples of lo-fi, such as the cassette-culture of the early eighties, the primary reason for lo-fi recording was a lack of money, it now has become a deliberate artistic choice, especially since technical innovations – digital recording –

¹ Anonymous, 2009
² Evens, 2005: 10
³ Malsky, 2003: 239
make decent recording increasingly affordable and lack of money is thus no longer necessarily a reason for lo-fi recording.

Examples of such a lo-fi approach are numerous nowadays: the chaotic records of The Moldy Peaches, the childish sounds of CocoRosie, the early records of Belle & Sebastian; but also soul singer-songwriter Cody Chesnutt – who recorded his album ‘The Headphone Masterpieces’ entirely on 4-track in his bedroom – or the recent hit record by singer-songwriter Bon Iver, recorded alone in a hut in Canada. Devendra Banhart, whose first record is an uncompromising example of lo-fi, for instance states he ‘never recorded in a super controlled environment like a professional recording studio.’

Michael Gira, owner of the record company which released Barnhart’s first albums and former front man of Swans released an album which title already perfectly encapsulates the idea of lo-fi: I am singing to you from my room.

The questions I want to address in this paper concern this deliberate use of lo-fidelity recording and production; most importantly what such a deliberate lo-fi approach signifies and what meanings are performed through a lo-fi aesthetic? Is the ideology of lo-fi indeed so different from that of hi-fi; is or is not it moving away from the hi-fi aesthetics of the music studio? Ultimately, all these questions boil down to a discussion of authenticity and, as I will argue towards the end of my paper, lo-fi and hi-fi merely use different strategies for attaining the same goal: authentication.

In order to do this I take anthropologist Marc Augé’s concept of the non-place – a kind of place reigned by solitude and similitude, creating neither singular identity nor relations – as my point of departure, arguing that the recording studio can be considered as an example of such a non-place. Inspired by the way theorist Peter Osborne’s describes how the art-gallery can be considered a non-place and as such is challenged by counter developments, such as site-specific art, I propose lo-fi as a challenge to the similitude of the studio-non-place. I describe the way in which these movements are always driven by strategies of authentication and how the ideology underpinning these are, in the end, not at all entirely different from the goals and strategies of hi-fi. Lastly, I conclude by stating how the studio has become not only ‘a’ place or ‘a’ tool for recording music, but also the conceptual framework for the (recording of) popular music in general.

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4 Devendra Banhart in Anonymous, 2009, September 24th 2009. The title of Banharts first album is Oh me oh my... The way the day goes by the sun is setting dogs are dreaming lovesongs of the christmas spirit
5 Gira, Michael. I am singing to you from my room. Young God, 2004
But, before beginning my analysis, I want to remark that, for the sake of argument, my analysis focuses primarily on the spatial aspects of lo-fi recording, leaving other prominent aspects such as the use of old or broken equipment, occasional amateurish musicianship or deliberate sloppy performances, aside. Furthermore, I present lo-fi as a more or less definable genre, all the while knowing that there are many different kinds of lo-fi recordings and many different stages of lo-fidelity, from recordings completely drowned in noise to predominantly hi-fi recordings incorporating lo-fi elements. So, as opposed to a standardized and ‘idealized’ depiction of hi-fi, I use a standardized, ‘idealized’ depiction of lo-fi. Nevertheless, I do not want to imply the one is in any way better than the other.

Lastly, I do not take the economic aspect into account either. As said, in earlier days, many lo-fi recordings were so cause of the lack of money for proper recording facilities. Many artists in various underground movements subsequently adapted the lo-fi aesthetic as a statement against capitalist music companies, turning the handicap into a trademark. Of course, these aspects are still relevant nowadays; it is not hard to imagine the connection between lo-fi and low costs, especially when one investigates the relationship between lo-fi and authenticity. Even when money is not an actual issue (when there are enough resources) and lo-fidelity is a conscious decision, it implies a greater independence (DIY) and artistic freedom, thus staging authenticity. Nevertheless, since these are issues different from the ones discussed, I will leave it aside in the following.

In 1995 French Anthropologist Marc Augé wrote his Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, in which he introduced a concept he considered crucial for our current post- or supermodern world: the non-place. Exemplary non-places are ‘traveller’s spaces:’ airports, stations, highways, subways. At non-places, the traditional concept of a singular, defined, ‘place’ is replaced by itinerary and textuality: signs, maps, re- and prescriptions. The traveller finds his way by following instructions. He is often alone, encountering ‘only solitude, and similitude,’ since non-places create ‘neither singular identity nor relations.’ Non-places are ‘spaces formed in relation to a certain end’ – commerce, leisure, transit – and they are defined by the relations people have with

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8 Augé, 1995: 103
these.\(^7\) As such, there is no room for either history or identity. Non-places are, according to Augé, a crucial part of our society and it is therefore important to realize ‘the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place.’\(^8\) But, vice versa, a non-place is also never fully realized: places always intervene with non-places.

In his article ‘The Network Studio’ cultural theorist Paul Thebergé takes Augé’s concept of the non-place and applies it to the recording studio. He traces the historical and technological developments in sound recording and demonstrates how they have lead to the recording studio becoming a non-place: ‘a more or less generic, functional place, a place at which musical ‘travellers’ can stop over to make recordings whenever and wherever it suits them, and always within the comfort of a certain temporary isolation.’\(^9\) Recording studios have become less and less a place of community and collaboration, and more and more shut off from the outside world; confined by individuality and solitary work. Thebergé quotes Antoine Hennion in comparing the studio with a laboratory: it is a laboratory ‘where musical experiments can take place.’\(^10\)

In the modern studio we encounter a standardized environment in which travelling musicians from all over the world can come and record under circumstances approximately the same as everywhere else, in order to make the recordings transferable to different studios. The musician often records alone, assisted by producers and engineers in nearby rooms. They are mirrored by modern solo-listeners, listening in the confinement of their houses or shut off from the world by headphones – like the audiophile: creating a personal, isolated, individual, high-tech listening environment – an island for listening.

The recordings made in these studio-non-places are reminiscent of their origin. Thebergé stresses how the controlled acoustics and standardized equipment generate an ‘acoustic non-space.’ The void of these neutral acoustics is filled with music production, for instance artificial reverberation, turning the non-space of the studio acoustic into the suggestion of a place. The non-place of the studio and the non-space of its acoustics are eradicated and turned into illusionary ‘places’ and ‘spaces.’ As philosopher and musicologist Stan Link writes ‘the recording becomes a fictional

\(^7\) Augé, 1995: 94  
\(^8\) ibidem: 107  
\(^9\) Thebergé, 2004: 772  
\(^10\) Hennion in Thebergé, 2004: 763
Similarly the solo-musician is resocialized through overdubbing: doubling himself or adding others: a fictional group.

Of course, the eradication is never completely fulfilled - non-places are never fully realized. The actual place and space always also intervene: the specific acoustics of this or that studio, certain equipment, local specificities. But it is always striving for the idealized non-place and its unspecific, globally transferable recordings. The concept of the studio-as-laboratory, the studio-as-non-place, prevails and is the origin of what we call hi-fi recording.

Theorist Peter Osborne also elaborates on Augé’s concept of the non-places in his essay ‘non-places and the spaces of art.’ Pushing it a little further from the concreteness of Augé’s ‘travellers place,’ he defines non-places as ‘radically new ontological types of place.’ In a move similar to Thebergé’s suggestion of the studio as non-place, he continues by arguing art-galleries, the ‘institutional spaces of art,’ are perfect examples of pure non-places. The ‘white cube,’ the art gallery - empty, neutral, without identity or history – has been the backdrop for (modern) art in the twentieth century and determined some of the courses it took. But this dominating spatial discourse just as well gave rise to several opposite developments. As Osborne quotes artist and writer Brian O’Doherty, ‘modern art needs the sound of traffic outside to authenticate,’ thereby defining the principle that gave rise to art practices challenging the institutional art (non)-place, such as site-specific art.

Site-specificity aims to get away from the disassociated, objective, dehistoricized environment of the galleries and museums to reconnect art with the rest of society. As art historian Miwon Kwon explains in ‘One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,’ site-specific art treats a ‘site’ as something more than a place. A site is a ‘cultural framework’ and site specificity aims at decoding, recoding and revealing the site’s framework through the artwork. As such, it does not only oppose the non-place of the gallery, but the unspecificity of supermodern non-places in general: contrary to the detached similarity of non-places, site –specific art is interested in the authentic meaning, memory, history and identity of a site. As Kwon argues, it ‘[reinforces] a

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11 Link, 2001: 38
12 Osborne, 2000: 189
13 ibidem: 190
general cultural valorization of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity. Site-specificity, writes Kwon, is a melancholic practice, aiming at recovering the authenticity, individuality and specificity of traditional places, which are threatened by the rise of its opposite: the non-place.

I am taking this analogy between Thebergé’s and Osborne’s analyses - respectively the recording studio and the art gallery as non-places – one step further. Similar to how the non-place of the gallery is challenged by its antipode of site-specific art, the studio-non-place and non-space are challenged by practices opposite to its hi-fi aesthetic: lo-fi.

Thebergé argues that by becoming a non-place, studios have lost ‘some of their connections with the ‘local,’ with the places in which they reside and with the musicians and musical styles that were once a part of those places.’ The eradication of the specificities of the recording space is coupled with a globalization of musicianship: studio musicians do not necessarily play in ways referring to a certain local tradition anymore. Slightly hyperbolically put: anything can be recorded anywhere; it does not actually matter who plays what music where, it is only the final result that matters.

Lo-fi recording practices intrinsically claim to oppose this unspecificity. In ways similar to site-specific art’s interest in the authentic meaning, memory, histories and identities of a site it relies much more on actual circumstances and preconditions: the time of recording, the recording space, the physicality of the musician and possible mistakes they make. Lo-fi does not rely on hi-fi’s ‘imagined’ space/place, but on actual, physical circumstances. It is not necessarily a matter of recording in- or outside a studio; a lo-fi production can also be realised in a ‘proper’ studio, using creative recording methodology. It uses the recording place/space in a different way: as a site, with its specific characteristics, instead of an empty space. I am not aiming at a binary opposition between studio and non-studio, but pointing towards different approaches of using the place/space and the equipment: eradicating or foregrounding the site of recording.

14 O’Doherty in Osborne, 2000: 190
15 Kwon, 1997: 104
16 Thebergé, 2004: 779
One of the most prominent aspects of lo-fi is its low signal-to-noise-ratio: lo-fi’s noisiness plays a crucial role in establishing what it is lo-fi signifies. With lo-fi, other than with site-specific art, the audience is not present at the actual site. Lo-fi might aim for a closer relationship between the music and its surroundings, by grounding the music more firmly in its recording site, the very fact that it is being recorded nevertheless always means that it is detached from this site and transferred to other places. For Stan Link noise establishes a relationship between the listener and the performer. The noise reduction used in hi-fi production ‘strives toward the unmooring of a located relationship.’\(^{17}\) Noise serves as a way to narrow the distance between the location of recording and the location of playback. For the listener it (although never fully) establishes the locatedness of the recording as being recorded by actual musicians at an actual time and place.

For Link, noise attaches the music to a ‘source,’ pointing to a genesis, a context, a history. Although the listener might not actually know these, it does suggest they are out there and can be known. Of course, with all recordings it is possible to trace the history and learn factual data about how they came about, but in the case of hi-fi recordings, produced with the use of the most advanced studio equipment in order to create a fully imaginative sonic world, these data do not relate in a meaningful way to the actual music. With lo-fi, the imperfections and noisiness – its suggested locatedness and physicality – suggest that these conditions contributed in a meaningful way to the final result. The noise of lo-fi music is what Link calls ‘a style of distance.’ It adds meaning to the music: ‘location, memory, presence, absence, temporality, and experience.’\(^{18}\) Noise reduction denies the acoustic space and the neutral place of the studio, replacing it with an imagined place and paradoxically increasing the distance between performer and listener by erasing all signs that could point to this distance. Lo-fi actually foregrounds this distance but also offers a way to fill it meaningfully, since noise, says Link ‘represents the activation of the space between [the listener] and the object.’\(^{19}\)

Links definition of noise as a ‘style of distance’ ties up with Kwon’s description of site-specificity as a melancholic practice. Lo-fi, just as site-specificity, taps into the longing for restoring authenticity, individuality and specificity that are attached to

\(^{17}\) Link, 2001: 37
\(^{18}\) ibidem: 47
\(^{19}\) Link, 2001: 47
traditional place and threatened by the spreading of non-places. The (although always fictional) crossing of the distance, through the noise of lo-fi recording, creates proximity, not only in space, but also in time. It is not difficult to imagine lo-fi to be melancholic for times when ‘purer,’ less technological advanced recording methods were used. Lo-fi recordings bring the listener back to an age where recording was, although not as crisp and clear as today’s hi-fi, still simple, human and grounded in an actual (musical and non-musical) context. In the same way as site-specificity traces and fixes the past, lo-fi ‘restores’ the bond by generating history, memory, and place, which, in the end, boils down to a matter of authentication.

Cultural theorist Simon Frith reminds us ‘authenticity can be heard in the music [, but] that what counts as authentic varies among music genres and subgenres.’\textsuperscript{20} One could argue lo-fi is directed against the illusionary, detached authenticity staged through the fictional space of studio-non-places. It (re)presents a different, supposedly more sincere, authenticity related to place and physicality, staging, on its turn, locatedness, identity, memory, specificity and proximity. In opposition to hi-fi’s supposed ‘inauthenticity,’ these aspects bear resemblance to performance theorist Philip Ausländer’s analysis of the concept of ‘liveness.’ As Ausländer shows, in the common day understanding of the ‘live’ it is considered to be the opposite of the ‘recorded.’ The ‘live’ is the not-recorded, the primary site, the real deal. It are these characteristics of the ‘live’-event that also inform the ideal of lo-fi: proximity and immediacy created through the direct contact between the artist and the audience, both present at the same, actual, place.

However, as Ausländer argues, this image of liveness is largely an illusion, since, in our culture, there exists (almost) nothing that is not always already mediatized. The live event is a way to authenticate the mediatized version: if the artist can proof he can actually pull it off on stage, the recording is authenticated. In the case of rock the live certifies the existence of a performance prior to its recording, although most people tend to know that this performance never actually took place, but was constructed through overdubbing and production. Lo-fi, using noise as a ‘style of distance,’ is based on a similar presumption: through the grounding of the performance in an identifiable time and

\textsuperscript{20} Frith in Ausländer, 1999: 66
place by a physically present performer (or performers) lo-fi references the original performances that took place prior to its recorded representation.

Hi-fi aims at the ultimate (utopian) goal of total transparency – the complete erasure of the audible difference between the ‘live’ and the ‘recorded. Contradictorily, this has lead towards increasingly artificial and highly constructed, illusionary, recordings, barely connected to the original performance, which never took place anyway. Lo-fi, directed against this illusion of hi-fi, consciously stages its own artificiality, conducting what Ausländer calls ‘authentic inauthenticity.’ The artists are foregrounding the artificiality of the recorded performance in order to authenticate it. As Ausländer quotes Grossberg: ‘the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge of inauthenticity.’ The illusion of proximity – of the auditory crossing of distance and time – is lo-fi’s strategy of authenticity. Lo-fi replaces hi-fi’s illusion of proximity-through-total-transparency with the illusion of proximity-through-conscious-artificiality. Both hi- and lo-fi aim for the same goal, but via exactly opposite routes: approximating the ‘live’ and erasing the distance between listener and performer/performance, thus authenticating the recording. In the end, both strategies are a fiction, which brings me back to the comparison between lo-fi and site-specific art.

Site-specific artist claim they reconnect the artwork with the history, identity and memory of its site: aspect that were lost in the neutral, objective and individualized environment of the gallery’s ‘white cube.’ In his aforementioned article Peter Osborne is suspicious of this claim. In his opinion it is not the site that imposes itself on the artwork, but the other way around: the work of art imposes itself on the site or, as he puts it, ‘art space is self instituting.’ As soon as the site-specific artwork takes hold of the site, the site is no longer the same: it is reconstituted as art-space. This means the non-place-gallery – which is not only a specific spatial configuration, but just as much the conceptual background of modern art – is not at all avoided in site-specific art. Instead, site-specific art turns a regular site into an art-site, thereby turning it in a non-place.

This just as well holds true for lo-fi: especially when it is a conscious aesthetic decision, it is still a form of music production, based on the same aesthetic, social and

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21 See, for instance, Grazyck, 1996 and Ausländer comment to this: ‘the problem with Gracyk’s argument is that most rock recordings are guilty of the same misinterpretation. Only a few rock records foreground the artifice of their studio construction; most are made to sound like performance that could have taken place even if they really didn’t (and couldn’t).’ Ausländer, 1999: 64
22 Grossberg in Ausländer, 1999: 90
artistic premises as any other way of production. In a sense, the ‘studio,’ as a (non-)place for the recording of music, for cutting it loose of its source and recreating it in a purely acoustic form, is instituted every time a recording is made. (In the case of digital recording this even translates visually; in the way most computer-software used to record at a non-studio environment, is designed to look as the control room of a studio). There now exist, as Stan Link writes, ‘very high-tech means to achieve “lo-fi” ends,’ creating recordings recorded in hi-fi, but made to sound as lo-fi.24 The distinction between the artificiality, the illusion, of hi-fi and the supposed sincerity and directness of lo-fi blurs up to the point where we, at least as far as the sonic end result goes, are unable to point to intrinsic differences between the two. Lo-fi is just one of many strategies to attain the ultimate goal in Popular Music: authentication.

The studio-non-place is an example of Augé’s depersonalized, neutral, unspecific description of supermodernity: solitary, similar, bereft of history and identity. Hi-fi recording fills this void with illusion: upholding the idea of an original performance by creating an unspecific place/space through the capabilities of audio production and sound design. It thereby imagines a connection between the solitary artist in the depersonalized non-place, and his or her audience, somewhere, sometime. Lo-fi takes the opposite route: just as site-specific art it tries to get away from the non-place that proofed so determining for the development of the art-form in question, by incorporating the actual world and consciously using specificity, history and identity in its creative process. Lo-fi artists try to create an intrinsic link between the work and its surroundings, in order to authenticate it. It deals with restoring supposedly lost or hidden meanings (memory, history) in a melancholic discourse. Lo-fi fills the void, left by the distance between artist and audience, with noise. Noise as a ‘style of distance’ fulfilling approximately the same role as the audio production and sound design in hi-fi recording: creating proximity by suggesting an original performance event. It foregrounds its artificiality in order to eliminate it; lo-fi is both a struggle for unmanipulated recording realism and an attempt to consciously reflect on the representational nature of recording and its inherent inauthenticity: what Ausländer refers to as inauthentic authenticity.

Hi-fi and lo-fi are different strategies to attain the same goal: approximating a supposed original performance event. Although the methods differ - they uphold a

23 Osborne, 2000: 191
different spatial configuration and a different relationship between the act of recording and the recorded end result – there is no *intrinsic* difference between the two strategies. They are both a blueprint for producing a record and since, as Frith writes, ‘that what counts as authentic varies among music genres and subgenres,’ they strive for different sonic results. In the end, lo-fi does not *really* does away with the studio. Similarly to how, as Osborne argues, art-space is self instituting and the art work reconfigures the ‘site’ of site-specific art, partly turning the place into a gallery-non-place, lo-fi is always also assessable to the studio, reinforcing its detaching and neutralizing disposition.

As such, we can conclude the studio is more than a sterile, depersonalized (non)place for making music. Instead, it has become the, almost universal, *conceptual* framework for the (construction of the) cultural, aesthetic and ideological meaning of popular music, penetrating all aspects it. This means the study of lo-fi music recording and production reaches into the heart of what popular music is, can be and is perceived to be, musically and culturally.

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