

# Traces of Sound

## Reflections of Sounds Unheard

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Cover photo by Jacob Kirkegaard from a field recording  
for his work *Crossfire* (2022).

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# Jacob Kirkegaard: Sounds Speak for Themselves

*Henrik Frisk*

In late August 2023 I met the composer and sound artist Jacob Kirkegaard to chat about how he thinks about sounds, their origins, and their agency. Kirkegaard is a highly original composer and sound artist with a meticulous method for exploring sound and the traces that sounds make. He often engages with materials that make sounds that are rarely heard, reflected on, or even accessible to listeners. He stages them in ways that allows them to speak for themselves and enables listeners to frame and understand them in their own ways.

Works such as *Crossfire* (2022), which has recordings of a barrage of gun and artillery fire, and *Aion* (2006), where four abandoned spaces in official exclusion zone around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine, are made to resonate. In light of these two pieces, I was interested in discussing Kirkegaard's opinions about the politics of sound. In the case of Chernobyl, for example, he makes the unheard heard in a double sense: most people cannot visit the site, and even if they could, the sounds heard in *Aion* would not be accessible. As an artist he gives a site a sound that perhaps was not there before, or at least was not heard, which might have political implications.

Our discussion began by mapping the meaningfulness of framing the politics of sound or sounds as a political utterance. Kirkegaard questioned whether there is anything political about his works. What he aims for is an exploration of a set of themes open to free, non-judge-

mental listening with no particular purpose other than to evoke the themes embedded in the sound. The common thread in his practice was at the most basic level concerned with what it is to be human. Works such as *Labyrinthitis* (2007), *Testimonium* (2019), and *Membrane* (202) are evidence of his artistic, aesthetic intensions.

Even so, he continued, the world context changes, which reconfigures the possible interpretations of his works. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, affects both *Crossfire*, with its evocation of the sounds of war, and *Aion*, where the contemplative place conjured up by Kirkegaard is now at the centre of a geopolitical conflict on a scale we have not seen since the Second World War. Yet despite the fact that his work clearly addresses contemporary and pressing themes, he has never sought to make overt political statements. Although world events may imbue any his work with new significance after its creation is thought-provoking, he maintained that its main identity remains unchanged. The fact his work is subject to evolving interpretations and can acquire new meanings and frames of reference, far removed from how it was once conceived, does not make it political.

This approach is part of Kirkegaard's view of his role as an artist. He is an artist and as such he asks questions about what is happening in the world. He uses his sensibility to devise new interfaces for listening, to make listening possible where it was not previously feasible. In the process he sets out to make objects, themes, and places speak for themselves. They speak their own language, he says. The sounds found in Chernobyl, he takes as an example, 'do not say yes or no, good or bad, left or right; they are not political.' Kirkegaard argues he is in no position to tell the listener what or how to feel: it is solely the responsibility of the listener to figure out what they think. Kirkegaard is firm on this point. He is not interested in deciphering the various meanings that may exist in his works, leaving that task to the listener. The sounds themselves are simply sounds and make no judgements about political matters, nor do they have opinions, and this is precisely his point: the sounds are *not* political. There is plenty of other kind of sonic communication today that tries to influence and manipulate the listener.



FIGURE 1. Photo from the working on *Aion* (2006) at the Zone of Exclusion in Chernobyl, Ukraine. With permission from Jacob Kirkegaard.

## Space for sensuousness

Kirkegaard uses the concept of ‘a space for sensuousness’ that allows the listener to arrive at their own point of view by listening to his works. It is crucial, he says, to spell out that he has no interest in manipulating his listeners or convincing them he is right or that he favours one thing over another; however, no one should mistake his discussion of certain topics for neutrality, though it is the listener who has agency and thus the responsibility to arrive at their own understanding. Kirkegaard says he is interested in instigating change in the world, but more than anything he wants to create a ‘breeding ground for a deeper kind of sensuousness’, one that is less vulnerable to the onslaught of information and opinions that dominate contemporary Western society.

Kirkegaard’s personal fears often feed into how he picks the themes of his works. Fear of radioactivity, fear of war or border walls, and the process of creating a space for listening to the objects that embody his fears evidently have an almost therapeutic role in his practice. He obviously makes choices about what sounds to work with, and how, and through these choices he influences the outcome. The way he uses mi-

crophones and sensors relative to these objects is one of the more important aspects of his work. But his goal is to allow the objects to find their own voices and for the artist to take a step back. The sounds ‘really speak for themselves’, he says, adding that, however much an abstraction, the sounds’ comparison to language only amplifies their impact.

## The ethics of sound

Kirkegaard’s works and working methods often prompt ethical considerations, both in their conception and in the materials they use, and potentially influencing their interpretation. I was curious to learn what he thought of this. For him, some of the answer lies in social norms that have changed dramatically in recent decades. Such attitudes can be simultaneously positive, natural, and problematic, and he has observed that a certain wokeness has had an impact on his practice. It is essential to Kirkegaard’s work to address difficult issues, and any narrowing in the boundaries of acceptability will present a challenge to the evolution of his artistic practice.

Kirkegaard’s fascination with the quality of the sounds he records is what distinguishes him from some of the sound artists who emanate from the visual arts, and whose relation to sound can be purely conceptual. The sound quality he is talking about centres on a certain balance in the sound: ‘that the sound, purely acoustically, has some bass, some mid register, high end—that it has a quality that allows you to get *in to the sound*.’ This could be attributed, at least in part, to Kirkegaard’s background in music. He describes a method of working in which he sets in motion an iterative process, perhaps only partially controlled by him, that yields new things and new sounds. The listening experience that can come from this is open to changes in a mental state ‘that is right in between the alienated and the well known’. He again points to the neutrality and the quality of the sound as the factors that facilitate this.

In our discussion, Kirkegaard often returned to his point that the role of his art is not to dominate the listener with conceptual and political truths. As an artist he is merely a facilitator; what he offers





FIGURE 2. Photo from the working on *Aion* (2006) at the Zone of Exclusion in Chernobyl, Ukraine. With permission from Jacob Kirkegaard.

you, the listener, is the chance to expand your understanding of the world, but it is up to you to do the work. It is a beautiful ambition that music should create a sensuous space that allows for this communication, and also a challenging one: ‘It is only here that you can actually tell what you really think.’ In this space there are no predefined expectations and no binary distinctions laid on you, and as the listener you have the freedom to develop your own opinion.

When I explore Kirkegaard’s works it is clear he has succeeded in his ambition: this rare space, the space for sensuousness, can indeed be created through his music. His art pushes boundaries, as art should do, and does not shy away from the awkward questions. His pieces ensure the sounds to stand for themselves in all their beauty. The nature of musical sound as Kirkegaard frames it—neutral, devoid of unequivocal meaning—sparks many questions. Metaphors abound in traditional music theory to explain the meaning of certain sonic events, of which harmony is probably the most salient exemplified by the *dominant* chord: a sound with a specific, relational meaning. One of

the greatest contributions by the American composer John Cage (1912–1992), encouraging the shift towards an aesthetic of sound for its own sake, the cornerstone of Kirkegaard’s music, was to abandon harmony.

The discussion with Jacob Kirkegaard also left me thinking of another reality, which also pertains to Cage: the American transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854, p. 105). In a short passage he rejected the symbolic meaning of the sounds of industrialization and asserted our right to define for ourselves what musical meaning they have: ‘If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like’.

## References

Thoreau, H. D. (1854), *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields).