

Tore Stavlund

THE HAUNTED EMPTINESS OF ABSENCE – A SONIC PORTRAIT OF HØYBLOKKA

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Everything to do with the terrible events of 22 July 2011 is difficult. Approaching what happened opens a Pandora's Box from which all horrors and pestilences come tumbling out, and it takes courage to hold the box open long enough for Hope to slip out in the end. So let us narrow the context down and go straight to the starting point for the audio artist and composer Alexander Rishaug's work *Y* (59° 54' 54.76" N 10° 44' 46.03" E): the psychoacoustic landscape in the empty Høyblokka as it stands today, tottering above the Government Quarter – a monumental memorial to the persistence and perhaps also helplessness of the bureaucracy.

There is a before and an after: the lawyer and author Aina M. Ertzeid was at work on the eighth floor of Høyblokka when, on a summer-still Friday, late in the general staff holiday period, it was subjected to the terror attack. In the novel *15:25*,¹ she writes about how difficult it is to reconcile oneself to what happened. In the book she also describes the inner life of Høyblokka. She depicts bureaucrats and caseworkers, department heads and ministers, their intrigues and disagreements, their work initiatives and their festivities. Apparently a normal office environment, but also a part of the officialdom surrounding the political power centre of the country. The massive building of 56 meters and seventeen floors, designed by the architect Erling Viksjø and constructed in 'natural concrete,' has, since its completion in 1958, housed the Office of the Prime Minister on the five upper floors and the Department of Justice on the others. Ertzeid writes: "On the top floor the Government met for conferences, state visits were received, and the magnificent view of the city was shown." On that fateful Friday, however, little was happening.

She is to work for one hour and then exercise [...]. Her gym bag stands ready at the door [...]. She hears a glass being put on the kitchen unit, efficient footsteps across the corridor and someone shouting something. A couple of offices away two colleagues are having a conversation. The dishwasher is running.

¹ Ertzeid, Aina M, *15:25*, Oktober Forlag, 2019.

In the drowsy quiet of the office landscape, the sound of everyday trivialities is borne effortlessly through the corridors. But then:

A deep boom. A wind rushes through the space. The building is lifted up and dropped down again. Something bumps against her stomach. The windows creak. A bang. Dust everywhere. In her mouth and throat. She can't see. A pain in the chest. She can't breathe. Is it poison? Gas? Is she going to die now?

She manages to get out in the stairwell:

The fire alarm pierces the building [...] shrilly echoing through the empty stairwell [...] Shattered concrete. Ruins. Cables and broken pipes hang from the ceiling. In towards the reception area everywhere is dark. The outer walls have been blown away.

Outside, the Government Quarter has been turned into post-apocalyptic chaos. There are shattered windows everywhere. Papers are floating down from the sky. Eight people have died, six of them were employed in the building and were in the entrance and reception area on the first floor, while two people were chance passers-by, nine are seriously injured and hundreds have been affected mentally or physically. And at this point we are not counting the inconceivable events on Utøya. But we are not going there. We will stick to Høyblokka.

Eight years later it stands there like a scraped-out shell, cleared and con-demned, stripped of all power. In October 2017, Alexander Rishaug was given permission to spend a couple of nights in there with his recording equipment. I can imagine him wandering around in desolate corridors equipped with microphones in search of Høyblokka's psychoacoustic state. Now and then he comes to a halt and sniffs, searches with his ears for almost inaudible sounds, lowers small microphones down into piping systems or inserts them into cavities, attaches contact microphones to surfaces, lets them listen to what the ear cannot register. Documents the resonance of the building, its comatose breathing.



Interior photo from H-Block

Rishaug is part of a tradition of audio art with its origins in the works of the Canadian composer and audio theorist R. Murray Schafer, whose book *Our Sonic Environment and The Soundscape. The Tuning of the World* from 1977 is a central work in the epistemological tradition of making recordings of audio environments. It was necessary, Schafer thought, to preserve authentic sound environments, both urban and rural, and thus contribute to a wider understanding of how sound environments evolve over time. A relevant example in this context is the Spanish audio artist and ecologist Francisco Lopez' recordings from the World Trade Centre in New York,² made in February and March 2001, that is, not long before the terror attack in September, in which recordings from machine rooms, elevator shafts and ventilation systems form the raw material for a sonic portrait of the buildings – not that the recordings were meant to be an authentic representation. Lopez categorically rejects the idea that a sound recording is just a representation of its source, and argues that it is an independent creative act with an autonomous result. Had it not been for the conceptual contextualization in the presentation of the recordings, the listener would not have been able to link them to their sources.

² Francisco Lopez, *Buildings (New York)*, V2_Archif, 2001.

We can say the same about the concrete results of Rishaug's work with *Y* ($59^{\circ} 54' 54.76'' N 10^{\circ} 44' 46.03'' E$), a vinyl LP release with a suite of eight tracks, each lasting exactly eight minutes. All the tracks open with silence before a gentle white noise is allowed to grow, becoming louder and louder until it has achieved an all-encompassing presence, which then fades out again. Through the name of the work – a combination of the Y-block's "Y" and the coordinates of Høyblokka – and the track titles – prosaic references to the time and location of the recordings – time and place provide the formal premises for the compositions. There is, all the same, nothing about the resulting soundscape that in itself points directly back to its origin. For example "Høyblokka – Kitchen, 17th floor, 07:31, 29.10.17" includes no sounds we would associate with a kitchen. Nor is there anything in "Høyblokka – Prime Minister's Office, 06:35, 17th floor, 29.10.17" that conjures up images of the Prime Minister's office early in the morning. This is where we find a twist in the work. We are induced by the prosaic titles to fill the compositions with expectations of something recognizable, only to realize – not without a shudder – that these expectations will never be fulfilled. For what is to be found in Høyblokka if not absence and emptiness? Precisely. And it is a doubly haunted emptiness. Haunted on the one hand by life as described in Ertzeid's novel about the officialdom of power, and on the other by the eerie reminder of the evil that moves among us and what it is capable of. It is this haunted emptiness that Rishaug has brought out and presents to us in his sonic portrait of Høyblokka.

Sound environments change over time and should therefore be documented for posterity, R. Murray Schafer argued. And this is what *Y* ($59^{\circ} 54' 54.76'' N 10^{\circ} 44' 46.03'' E$) does, in that the work absorbs Høyblokka's psychoacoustic state. It is a timely piece of work. For soon this state will become historical. In a few years, the administration of Norway and the Prime Minister's Office will be back in the block, and with four new floors to its disposal, while the Y-block, is scheduled irrevocably for demolition.

