

**The London Consortium**  
**Static. Issue 06 – Alarm**

<http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue06/>

# Katherine Hunt

## Editorial

[http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue06/hunt\\_editorial.html](http://static.londonconsortium.com/issue06/hunt_editorial.html)

---

© Katherine Hunt / Static / London Consortium / December 2007

---

Static is the web resource of the London Consortium, a unique collaboration between the Architectural Association, Birkbeck College (University of London), the Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Science Museum, and Tate.

Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc.

Static welcomes feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists, and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

<http://static.londonconsortium.com>

---

The London Consortium – <http://www.londonconsortium.com>  
Architectural Association – <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/>  
Birkbeck College (University of London) – <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/>  
Institute of Contemporary Arts – <http://www.ica.org.uk/>  
The Science Museum – <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/>  
Tate – <http://www.tate.org.uk/>

This issue of *Static* breaks the glass on a fire alarm, and sticks around to listen to the clamour. It seeks to ask whether, and how, alarms can retain their message and urgency in our crowded soundscape, scarred by a permanent state of heightened 'orange alert'.

*À l'arme* in Old French, or the Italian *all'arme*, was literally a call to arms: the alarm roused, gathered together, and provoked action and skirmish. The English word 'alarm' has come to signify a warning rather than an action. It no longer urges us to go out and fight, but advises us to protect or to scatter. A fire alarm sends disgruntled office workers tramping out on to the pavement; a siren crumples traffic out of the way; and our daily wake-up call, warning us not to be late for work, abruptly encourages us to do no more than begin our quotidian ablutions.

Alarm now denotes not just the signalling noise, but the state of fear and apprehension that surrounds it. This use of the term has a relatively recent etymology, only really breaking free from the original, signal sense of 'alarm' in the nineteenth century. But it is this meaning, this reflection of paranoias, false starts, and things to come, that dominates our understanding of the word. ALARM, the U.K.'s 'National Forum for Risk Management in the Public Sector', attempts to anticipate any emergency in fields from health and safety to financial insurance. The U.S. Department for Homeland Security offers '30 Tips for Emergency Preparedness'. In this haze of anxiety the ring of an alarm bell, the signal that something really might be wrong after all, comes almost as a relief.

The howl of the unexpected alarm shatters normality and bypasses reason, but its meaning must be communicated instinctively and immediately. Alarms can appeal to all senses – flashing warning lights, for example, or substances secreted to offend noses and taste-buds by skunks or squid. But it is the sense of hearing that is most usually put to use in an alarm. Sound strikes the alarm collectively and effectively into bodies individual and social: it is incorporated into the ear, moving hammers and anvils to send the signal on; and into the corporate understanding, too, with each sound having both a communally-recognised meaning and response.

Church bells ringing in a particular way – the urgent strike of the tocsin – used to be loud and unusual enough to surprise and alarm the community that owned and rang them. The sound depended on the unusual, rapid motions of the ringers to provoke a similar reaction in the bodies of the listeners. Now automated and made regular, the insistent repetition of electronically-produced alarm sounds have flatlined into a continuous and deafening tinnitus. Just as the phrases 'wake-up call' and 'alarm bells' have become journalistic cliché, so have the actual sounds of alarms become formulaic and ignorable. The night-time car alarm operates more as an irritant than a genuine alert. The directional range of American police sirens are considered more effective than the old two-tone British siren but, because they are so familiar from cop shows on T.V., the simpler two-tone sound seems more likely to be truly alerting. Amongst the hums and the wails, the squawks and the buzzes that characterise the modern soundscape, it is harder to find alarms that are able to cut through. For the alert and the inured alike, habit is both a great deadener and a great deafener.

This issue of *Static* gathers sound artists, critics, musicians and filmmakers to assail and delight the senses, a new consideration of the

idea and the sounds of 'alarm'. In 'Confidential Incident Report', John Wynne uses the real testimony of an airline pilot as the basis for an audio-visual piece that makes clear how dangerous a multiplicity of alarms can be. The subtle differences between alarms can be impossible to detect: we are like guests in *Fawlty Towers*, unable to distinguish between the sounds of the fire and burglar alarms despite Basil's extravagant attempts to explain their difference during the drill. Thom Bailey's piece, inspired by the battle-cries of Japanese martial arts, tries to imagine sounds that might be able to break through our immunity. In so doing, he has created a set of targeted alarm signals to police the dystopian (but all too likely) future.

The noises and rhythms of alarms are part of our aural lexicon. In his paper Thomas Mansell shows how and why the everyday sounds of alarms and bells pepper Beckett's stage plays *Endgame* (1957) and *Happy Days*. This attentive reading of (and listening to) Beckett suggests broader ideas about the relationship between noise and meaning, and indeed noise and music, that illuminate all the possible resonances of 'alarm'.

Phylis Johnson and Jonathan Pluskota, in a sound piece with an accompanying essay, question the meanings of sounds and the uses to which they are put. Inspired by Henry David Thoreau's aural awareness, Johnson and Pluskota imagine an aged American train and a new, quieter Japanese one arriving together at Thoreau's cabin in Walden, Massachusetts. The diverging sounds of these trains act as alarms and markers of both the future and the nostalgic past.

The scream is a key sound of modernity, not least in Munch's painting of that name. Screaming is always an expression of alarm and a sounding of the alarm, and in itself alarms others. In his essay, Matthew Wraith questions how a scream prompts its own gatherings and scatterings in ways which relate to other signals.

All clanging and wailing is waiting for a profound silence to follow it: the silence after a fire alarm has stopped ringing seems more present than the quiet before it. Brandon LaBelle takes as his starting point the gestural alarm of a wagging finger or judge's gavel, marking the entrance into an enforced period of silence.

The final cluster of pieces in this issue of *Static* suggests ways to harness nagging alarm sounds, putting them to new uses in unexpected contexts. Lin Culbertson composes familiar beeps in an ebbing rhythm, which coalesces into a symphony of strangely tranquil alarms. In his essay, Richard Osborne demonstrates the prevalence and importance of alarm signals, sirens, and bells in popular music. Such noises reflect, he argues, the desire to hear ourselves and the sounds we make, which has been a concern from the very earliest phonograph recordings. These noises, like pop music itself, are the sounds of and from the street. Finally, Theodore Tagholm's subtle elegiac piece transforms the alarm-like signal of a flashing light and beep into a delicate communication from the spirit world.

Along with my co-editor, Thomas Mansell, I would like to thank Richard Osborne, Vlad Strukov, Steve Connor, Joseph Kohlmaier, Konstantinos Stefanis, Irini Marinaki, and Martine Rouleau for their invaluable assistance in preparing this issue.

Just as alarms can both summon and send forth, it is hoped that the contributions gathered here will continue to disperse and resonate.