

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 06 – Alarm

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‘Kiai’: Hypothetical Behaviour-Mod Alarms

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The public alarm or emergency siren has become a universally recognizable component of the sonic landscapes of the modern world. With constant tones that can pierce the pain threshold at a distance of 100 metres, and with their brutal austerity, alarm mechanisms sound highly unnatural while still being tied to one of the most deeply ingrained natural instincts – our instinct to 'fight or flee'. As a rule of thumb, sirens must contain a simple looped tone that will not be complicated by the incidence of other sirens going off nearby; announcements with human voices can also complicate things if there is a delay between the respective starting times of the announcements. In most cases a single continuous tone, or two tones alternating between rising and falling, have been enough to signal incoming or present danger. In many situations a pre-recorded human voice message or an announcement would also be inappropriate: it simply might not have the authority that a jarring, alien blast of noise would possess to stun violators and to re-direct their behavior. In the same way that an actual warning shot (which bypasses our ears' protective 'acoustic reflex') is more effective than announcing 'stop – or I'll shoot!', alarm noises can bypass our processes of rationalization (we regularly shrug off verbal warnings as empty threats, continuing to do as we please). This is especially true of electronic signals, which can wreak havoc on our perception of loudness thanks to their potentially infinite duration – even the most rabidly intense authoritarian voice has to make brief pauses to catch its breath.

Alarms have many uses. They give warning of natural disasters such as tornadoes, the possibility of burglary and break-ins, air raids, prison breaks and, on some Australian beaches, shark attacks. Just like the alarm tones themselves, the problems are not complex, insofar as they really require only one of two possible actions: fight or flight. However, the problems people face, especially in densely populated areas, are not limited to natural disaster and warfare. Social problems and nuisances are also cause for alarm, but as yet, have no dedicated alarm call. I propose, for some would-be utopian city in the near future, a series of alarms that could be activated when certain corrosive nuisance behaviours reach intolerable levels. This could become much more common as western societies deal with their problems by becoming overprotective 'nanny states'. With observation cameras at every major stoplight in some cities, and measures such as city-wide smoking bans gaining in popularity, can this kind of aural deterrent really be far behind? As a sound artist I can only offer some possible sounds of a kind that may await us in such a society. Obviously there is a broad palette of nuisance-causing activities, and these need to be countered by sounds as intense as the traditional warning siren, but slightly more specific to the individual acts themselves, lest the perpetrators merely panic and assume that someone else in the immediate vicinity is doing something wrong.

I have designed a series of alarm signals, named 'kiai' after the Japanese martial-arts term for a sudden, blood-freezing yell. These alarms would patrol the would-be utopian city of the near future in a number of ways: they could be activated by sensors in public buildings or on public transportation, or by roving sound trucks seeking to catch violators in the act. Like traditional alarms, the sounds generated would be simple and repetitive, acting on sound psycho-acoustic principles, but would make use of digital-age sound design technology to mock certain aspects of the behavior being targeted by the alarms: for example, a subway-based alarm meant to curb the use of mobile-phone usage would parody the sound of ringtones, clustering together

the sound of several 'rings' and spitting them back out in a loud atonal melange that renders conversation impossible. Other alarms would delve into the realm of the abstract: for example an anti-loitering alarm might make use of sluggish, loping low-frequency tones that give an impression of slothfulness and pointless activity.

Of course, the great irony of all this is that such alarms would be unnecessary in a society in which people directly confronted each other about their grievances, rather than letting things slide until it became the job of an impersonal alarm device to correct offensive behavior. Sadly, though, some Japanese cities I have visited are already headed in the direction of such alarm systems: with their vast variety of pre-recorded announcements which warn against everything from escalator abuse to football hooligans, direct confrontation is increasingly rare, prompted by only the most disruptive of acts.

These 'kiai' are ultimately intended as a rough outline of things to come, and as such listeners are free to see them as they wish: ridiculous, frightening, idiotic, perhaps even counter-productive in terms of reducing public annoyance.