Interlude

Field Notes

11
Inside the Factory: Observing Musical Production

This chapter follows the producer featured in the second case study, Lara Sarkissian, in the process of working on a new composition.

I have so far focused on the analysis of five released tracks and the sampling strategies behind them. Although I chose tracks which had been recently published at the time when I conducted the interviews, their actual production processes dated back between one and three years. This created a methodological challenge: it was often hard—and sometimes even impossible—to retrace aspects related to the creative process of production, such as intuition, inspiration, and the selection of sampling sources. This interlude now offers an observation and description of a sampling process in action. Here, I aim to offer a rare insight into the factory of popular music, exploring crucial questions such as: why have particular samples been processed instead of others? How were they processed, and which factors influenced this process? Unlike in the preceding case studies, I will thus not conduct an in-depth analysis of the sample in the context of the final track.[1]

See Chapter 2 for a thorough discussion of the methodological problems that arose during my research.

This chapter follows the producer featured in the second case study, Lara Sarkissian, in the process of working on a new composition. In spring 2016, Sarkissian was invited by the Berlin-based Institute for Sound & Music ISM, and the platform for music research Norient, to take part in a project called "Hexadome." The project encompassed a four-week artist residency at the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, between March 13 and April 6,

→ Chapter 7

For a discussion of my personal involvement in the project see end of Chapter 2.

1 Accordingly, I will not use the analytical tools FOV and SSR in this chapter. These tools require a released musical product as their analytical object.

2018. During this residency, Sarkissian worked on her composition for the "Hexadome" installation, scheduled for presentation at Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau museum on April 13, 2018. The ISM "Hexadome" is an audiovisual installation combining six square hexagonally arranged projection screens with the "Klangdom" sound system, a configuration of 52 speakers that can be addressed via separate channels. The installation resembles the architecture of a dome and, as the organizers claim, enables an immersive audiovisual experience.[2] In Karlsruhe, Sarkissian worked on her track and learned how to use the specific software needed to operate the "Klangdom" system. The video part of the installation was developed by Jemma Woolmore, who joined Sarkissian for some days during the residency.

I followed Sarkissian in Karlsruhe for two weeks (from March 20 to April 6, 2018, with a short break in between), conducting four longer interviews (between 40 minutes and one hour) and attending two producti on sessions. This gave me the chance to observe the producer working with samples and immediately talk to her about what she was doing. My sources for this chapter are field notes, recordings of both the longer interviews and parts of our conversations during the two observation sessions, and several versions of the Ableton Live project file, which I transferred to my hard drive after each session.

These interviews also informed the analysis of "kenats" in Chapter 7.

Lara Sarkissian's artist residency in Karlsruhe gave me the opportunity to be present for the process of production of a single track in a condensed form. Usually, Sarkissian produces tracks over longer periods of time, during which intuitive and unscheduled decisions are made regarding when to actually work on them. In this case, she had to make a track in a clearly defined period, without further obligations regarding jobs or social activities. For me, this was an ideal, almost laboratory situation in which to accompany the process of production and to catch sampling moments.

Although a methodical challenge (access) had been solved, I was simultaneously confronted by new challenges, such as the intimacy and spontaneity of the process, and the technical set-up involved in producing in front of a small laptop screen. Based on the two observation sessions, I will now present a field report describing sampling processes in Lara Sarkissian's track "Thresholds," composed for the ISM "Hexadome" installation.[3] After a discussion of this report focusing on various key characteristics of the sampling process, I will close this section by illustrating how such an approach can widen the focus of the previous analyses.

I will discuss the challenges of conducting fieldwork among laptop producers in the last section of this chapter.

2   See Kirn 2018 for a more detailed discussion of the technical aspects of the project.
3   The track was not published as an official release. There are two short excerpts of the installation accessible on the Vimeo profile of Jemma Woolmore (Woolmore 2018a, 2018b). Lara Sarkissian's debut EP *DISRUPTION*, released on her own label Club Chai in December 2018, also processes some of the material she used for the Hexadome installation.

Lara Sarkissian: Sampling in "Thresholds"

Field Report

(a) First Session: Karlsruhe, March 26, 2018, 9–11 p.m.

I met Lara Sarkissian for the first observation session at 9 p.m. at Studio 4 at the Center for Art and Media (ZKM). When I entered the room, she was sitting with Jemma Woolmore, her video partner for the project, and Tarik Barri, another artist working on a Hexadome installation. Barri had just finished introducing Sarkissian to the software. There were two large tables in the center of the room. The workspace on the right was occupied by Sarkissian and the one on the left by Woolmore. On Sarkissian's desk there was a laptop, a larger screen, and a mixing console, and two big studio speakers had been set up in front of the desk.

The three artists had just taken a break and were about to leave the studio to get something to eat in the kitchen on the upper floor. It was 9.50 p.m. when they returned (Barri was working in the studio next door). The time of day is typical for Sarkissian's workflow: during her residency, she would start work late morning and continue until midnight. Sarkissian told me that she was confident with her day so far. She had finished a first version of the track's first part and tested it at the "Minidom"—another ZKM studio containing a small version of the "Klangdom" system. Afterwards, she had continued working on the next part of the track, looking for some new samples. This was the point at which I joined her.

Sarkissan took a seat and started to work. I observed her surfing the internet on her laptop. She was typing terms into the search bars of Google and YouTube. She complained about the internet connection, which was very slow. First, she searched on YouTube for a particular video about street protests in Tehran, Iran, on the 102nd anniversary of the Armenian Genocide on April 24, 2017.[4] Sarkissian knew exactly which video she was looking for; she had seen it on the social media platform Instagram a few days before. She told me that the video showed protesters singing a particular song in the streets. I saw her scrolling through YouTube, clicking through videos, and googling other videos, before returning to YouTube. Occasionally, she commented on the clips to Woolmore. Sometimes she slid her cursor over the timeline of a particular video to check the preview images, looking for a suitable scene without clicking on the file to play it.

In between, she checked emails and accessed the social media platform Facebook. She further discussed with Woolmore an

---

4 Armenian communities around the world organize protests on this day every year, demanding that the republic of Turkey finally acknowledges the Armenian Genocide.

issue regarding the planning of the rehearsal week in Berlin follow-
ing the Karlsruhe residency. She returned to the hunt for the video
in question for another five to 10 minutes, but still without success.
She finally focused on a video that she had already accessed be-
fore I joined her. The clip, compiled and uploaded by Russian video
news agency Ruptly, bears the title "Iran: Protesters call on Turkey
to recognize Armenian Genocide," and features footage from the
protests in Tehran on April 24, 2016 (Ruptly 2016).[5] In between street
protest scenes, the video features interviews with protesters, such
as Karen Khanlari, an Iranian-Armenian lawmaker. Speaking in Far-
si, Khanlari discusses the protesters' main demand—the video de-
scription features an English translation: "Our demand is that Turkey
recognizes the historical truth and accepts legal responsibility for
it" (ibid.). Clearly, Sarkissian was thinking about sampling this quota-
tion in her track. Talking to Woolmore, she referred to the lawmaker:
"I don't want it to be audible what she is saying. But underlined it will
be there." Finally, Sarkissian downloaded the video from YouTube
using the website youtubemp3.to.

   She then began to edit the sample. She opened a new window
in Live and dragged the audio file into it. She then roughly cropped
the file, separating the quotation from the rest of the clip. After-
wards, she copied and pasted the clip into a new audio track in the
"Thresholds" project file. She pulled up the volume of the sample
and duplicated it two or three times on separate audio tracks. At this
point, her Ableton Live 9 crashed. She mentioned that this had been
happening from time to time recently. After rebooting the program,
she manipulated the copies of the sample with various effects,
testing out different adjustments and listening repeatedly to the re-
sult. She referred to a note in her Apple Notebook app, where she
had written down a few things she thought might be of use for the
project before leaving the U.S. for Germany. In the lower section of
the note—labeled with the caption "VOC FX"—she had highlighted
some effect chains that she had already applied in a previous pro-
duction. Each line of the note represented an audio track and its re-
spective effects chain. Table 11.1 shows a comparison between the
notes (left) and the edit of the Iranian-Armenian protest sample in
"Thresholds" (right). The numbers refer to the respective audio track
in Live (right, corresponding to Figure 11.1) or lines in the note (left).

5   The video is introduced with the following information on YouTube: "Protest-
ers gathered around Tehran's St. Sarkis Cathedral to commemorate the 101th [sic]
anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, to call on Turkey to recognize the events
as genocide, and to condemn the recent escalation of conflict in the disputed
Nagorno-Karabakh region. SOT, Arpic Elbeygian, Armenian protester (Farsi): 'We
want them to recognize this [genocide] happened, and we want Western Arme-
nia's lands back, Turkey must pay reparations for the 1.5 million people who were
killed.' SOT, Karen Khanlari, Iranian-Armenian lawmaker (Farsi): 'Our demand is
that Turkey recognizes the historical truth and accepts legal responsibility for it'"
(Ruptly 2016).

	Notes from a previous project		Implementation in "Thresholds"
1	longest ping pong / bass low extender / bass low extender	63	vocal A
2	sizzle / bass low extender	64	ping pong
3	robo voice / uneven two / bass low extender	65	robo voice / uneven two / bass low extender
4	vocal A / long ambience / uneven two		

Table 11.1: Effect chains applied to the Iranian-Armenian protest sample in "Thresholds"
(as of March 26, 2018; source: Lara Sarkissian)

Having applied these effects to the sample-clips, she started to cut them into pieces. From a distance it seemed as if she was doing this randomly, because she was not listening to the results. In fact, she was cutting the samples visually, focusing on the waveform display. This allowed her to make sure that one sample was playing when the other was silent. This screenshot shows the results of this session:
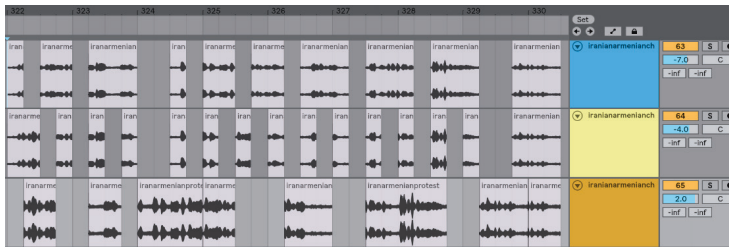

Figure 11.1: Excerpt from "Thresholds" (as of March 26, 2018; screenshot from Live)

After a while, she interrupted her work on the sample. "It's not exactly how I want it, but…" she mumbled. I did not understand everything she said, but it was something like "it's not really well-balanced yet." Instead, she continued googling videos by the Russian-Armenian filmmaker Sergei Parajanov, skipping through a 1964 film of his on YouTube. The film showed rural scenes and bible readings. The material was obviously not meeting her expectations, and she continued looking for other videos by Parajanov without digging for further potential sampling material.

Eventually, she had had enough of the slow internet connection, and decided to continue her work at home later. Until now, she had been staying in a hostel where the internet connection did not work at all, but she had just moved to an Airbnb apartment with a stable internet connection. Visibly tired from a long day of work, she said to Woolmore: "Honestly, I miss making music on my bed. This is all amazing here, but I just miss being in a cozy setting." Once again, she checked her emails, and checked the timetable for catching the last bus back to her apartment.

(b) Second Session: Karlsruhe, March 27, 2018, 3.30–5 p.m.

We scheduled another observation session for the next day. We had planned to meet at 3 p.m. in the ZKM studio, but Sarkissian postponed the meeting by half an hour. On this day, she only partially

worked on sampling, being more concerned with balancing the different parts (EQing). Moreover, she worked on headphones, so I was only able to get a visual impression of her workflow. It became apparent that the method of chopping the sampling material observed in the first session is one of her crucial sampling techniques: she repeated the same workflow with other samples. It was clear that Sarkissian was quite tired.

■

This field report emphasizes both the multilevel character of the sampling process and the external and internal influences on this process, such as media, place, and habitus. The discussion of these two aspects that follows will deepen the analysis found in the <u>case study of "kenats"</u> and further sharpen our understanding of the producer's personal sampling approach.

Before continuing, I want to make a short remark on the second observation session. This session turned out not to be very productive for my purposes. There are a few possible explanations: Sarkissian's workflow (wearing headphones), her focus (EQing instead of sampling), and her condition (tired). Nevertheless, I decided to include a short paragraph on it because it illustrates the difficulty of catching the right moment for observation within the greater process of production. I will further discuss methodical challenges below.

Sampling as a Multilevel Process

The field report above illustrates the notion of sampling as a multilevel process, as introduced <u>in the beginning</u> of this book. In the present case, sampling encompasses four main stages: <u>research, selection, access, and editing</u>. The first stage, research, is of particular importance. This is also the stage neglected in procedural definitions of sampling found in the academic literature.

(a) Research

Describing and understanding the first stage—the search for suitable sampling material—requires a short discussion of the producer's motives and motivations. I can identify at least three major factors: (1) the need for vocal samples at a particular position in the track; (2) Sarkissian's tendency to sample material from Armenian culture; and (3) her personal interests prior to the production session.

In our conversations, Sarkissian repeatedly emphasized her preference for vocal samples. Referring to another vocal sample used in the same project, she recalled that she needed "to have a voice in there" and that this was the "initial thing"—meaning the

initial thought that led to her search for the sample in question. I would suggest similar motives in the case of the sample that Sarkissian was looking for during my observation session. There were not yet vocals at the moment in "Thresholds" where Sarkissian inserted the protest sample, though I could identify vocal samples at crucial other positions in the track. It is thus likely that Sarkissian felt the need to include a vocal sample at that particular point. (In the SSR, this reason would be categorized under the material approach.)

Another reason for sampling is contextual, and combines at least the active, neutral, and personal perspectives from the SSR. As I have shown in the analysis of "kenats," the connection of her sampling material to Armenian culture is fundamental to Sarkissian's sampling. In this case, Sarkissian was looking for sampling material from protests that occurred in the context of Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

The third component to our reasons for sampling is again contextual, and concerns the producer's personal interests immediately prior to the production session (neutral perspective of the SSR). Sarkissian takes subjects she is concerned with as sources of inspiration. If she does not sample material directly connected to these interests, she takes them as starting points to search for potential new material. During the research stage, Sarkissian connects to previous experiences of reception. In my first observation session, this was shown by her search for a particular video that she had previously seen on Instagram. This process took up a substantial part of the session. Sarkissian later told me that, during her Karlsruhe residency, she sometimes went to the museum bookstore in the same building to get inspiration for further sampling material. In this stage of the sampling process she reads a lot, googles, and looks for video material to sample from. This is a first indication of the considerable influence of her environment on the sampling process.

Though aesthetic characteristics played a role, Sarkissian's primary attention at this stage was on the content of the sampling material.

However, the subject of the Armenian Genocide, which forms the background to the sampling process in question, was not only a concern of Sarkissian's in the days and weeks prior to her residency; it is a topic she deals with constantly. This can be understood with reference to my previous introduction of the Armenian Genocide and the ongoing struggle for official recognition as a persistent trauma among Armenian diaspora communities.

In conclusion, the first stage of this sampling process was shaped by intensive research on suitable sampling material, substantially motivated by the need for a vocal sample. Moreover, Sarkissian engaged with a topic that she had already been concerned with for a long time. Though aesthetic characteristics played a role (how does the material sound?), Sarkissian's primary attention at this stage was on the content of the sampling material (what do

these protesters say or sing?). Connecting to the general field of sampling motives <u>introduced earlier</u>, this stage was shaped by the fields of inspiration and content, but not by communicational aims.

(b) Selection

The second stage is the selection of sampling material. Sarkissian failed to find the Instagram video. Instead, she chose another clip that she had bookmarked while browsing YouTube. At this point in the sampling process, Sarkissian set some guidelines for the up-coming editing stage. She mentioned to her video partner, Jemma Woolmore, that she did not want the sample to be audible in the track. I interpret this as another hint that the primary function of the sample is to bring vocal texture to the composition. It is neverthe-less clear that the specific content of the sample remains impor-tant. Why otherwise would she conduct such a thorough search for the sampling material? I asked Sarkissian whether, in general, the meaning of her vocal samples plays a role:

> *It's important. But I don't necessarily always want to make the vocal sample audible. But it's more for me and myself, it's kind of knowing that that message is there, but kind of having fun with like manipulating the sound, the pitch of it.*

Hence, the significance of the meaning of these vocal samples operates on a personal level. Sarkissian wanted to have that sam-ple with that particular content in the track, but only "for herself," and not as a visible or audible layer. This explains the absence of the general field of communication from our analysis of this sam-pling strategy.

Finally, it is important to note that the first (research) stage and the second (selection) stage are intertwined: Sarkissian found the YouTube video earlier on the day of the first observation session, put it aside, continued looking for the Instagram video, then even-tually returned to the initial clip. It was only then that she finally se-lected it as working material.

(c) Access

The third stage is the conversion of the sample material. Sarkissian downloaded the video from YouTube with the help of a web-based plugin. The case studies of <u>Eomac and M.E.S.H.</u> have shown that, in some cases, there is a substantial interval between the download of the sample material and the editing stage. Here, the stages oc-curred in quick succession, and the storing stage was skipped over. (I will briefly discuss a minor aspect of storing in the concluding section of this chapter below.) This has to do with personal produc-ing habits, but it might also be affected by the circumstances of the artist residency: Sarkissian had to finish the track by the end of the residency and therefore was forced to move on.

The researcher might also have accelerated this process. Sarkissian invited me to this session because she was planning to work with sampling material, knowing that I was particularly interested in this part of the production process. I never had the impression that she had substantially changed her workflow due to my presence. Still, she might have felt that abruptly ending the process, or going back to the first or second stage, was not an option simply because I was there—she wanted to show me "something."[6]

(d) Editing

Sarkissian finally continued by editing the sample. This stage began with preprocessing. Following the field report, Sarkissian prepared the sample in a separate Live file, before copying the excerpt with the interview quote into the main project.[7] The subsequent editing process was substantially shaped by visual strategies.

After having prepared the sample, Sarkissian duplicated the clip two times and applied some effects to the different layers. She subsequently cut all three samples into smaller segments.[8] It was surprising to see how she cut the samples without listening to the results—a strategy the producer had already mentioned in our discussion of "kenats": "Sometimes, visually things make sense to me before the sound does." Sarkissian described this step of editing as almost "randomly" executed. Beyond this aspect of randomness, her strategy was to cut the samples according to the visual appearance of the waveform. While the first two audio tracks in Live (nos. 63 and 64) are mostly cut at similar positions, the third audio track (no. 65) is cut to bridge several fragments of the other audio tracks (nos. 63 and 64). As a result, the three audio tracks containing the protest sample superpose each other, and there is almost no moment where no sample fragment is playing. The addition of an extended delay effect on audio track 65 further intensifies this impression, and lowers the comprehensibility of the original vocals. What remains in the audible sound is its vocal-derived character.

Sarkissian did not develop this playful strategy from scratch for the present production. Instead, she took one of her earlier tracks as a model. In fact, cutting and layering vocal samples is one of the producer's frequently deployed sampling strategies. The field notes on the second production session above show this, as do other vocal samples in "Thresholds" that were processed in a similar way.

These strategies are similar to those mentioned in Chapter 7. for "kenats".
See personal note in Table 11.1.

283

→ Figure 11.1

Cutting and layering vocal samples is one of the producer's frequently deployed sampling strategies.

6   To address this methodical challenge, the researcher would have to take part in all producing sessions of a given project. However, this would raise further challenges relating to access (keyword: intimacy of music production), as discussed below in this chapter.
7   This approach makes it impossible to trace all editing steps later by analyzing the Live file.
8   Unlike in the editing process for "kenats" (Chapter 7), it is not appropriate to use the term "sample chopping" here, since Sarkissian did not change the order of the clipped bits.

Having illustrated four stages of sampling—research, selection, access, and editing—I want to continue by emphasizing two further aspects concerning the interaction between and across stages. The first acknowledges that the process is not necessarily linear, but can be interrupted and altered from the start. The second links the question of reasons for sampling with the stages introduced above, showing that not all sampling reasons must necessarily be clear at the moment of sample selection.

Not all sampling reasons must necessarily be clear at the moment of sample selection.

When finishing her work towards the end of the first observation session, Sarkissian mumbled that the edit of the sample was not exactly how she wanted it. After the session, we chatted informally for a while, and I asked her if she was planning to continue editing the sample later. She answered that she had not decided if she would use the sample or not. After the case studies of Eomac and M.E.S.H., this is the third example of a collection of sampling tactics that have been described by Justin Morey (2017, 291) as "start with a sample, then discard it," or by Paul Harkins (2010a, 9) as the "additive approach."

Furthermore, the processing of the protest sample in "Thresholds" shows the possibility of a shift in sampling intentions, or the emergence of new sampling motivations, at various stages of the process. As stated above, the main sampling motivations in the earlier stages were the vocal texture of the clip and the subject of the Armenian Genocide. However, just one week after the observation sessions, Sarkissian mentioned that she had suddenly recognized a particular meaning in the sample that she had not previously been aware of. Sarkissian and Woolmore conceptualized "Thresholds" as a cycle "very much based on Armenian narratives," discharging into a "new, unfamiliar place" or "feeling" towards the end of the piece. According to their concept, the last part of the track should indicate "a new place that people are going into."[9] To create this sense of a new place, Sarkissian reintroduced sounds from the beginning of the track, but in a distorted way. When I started my first observation session, the producer was working on this part of the track, and she positioned the protest sample at the beginning of it. Regarding the meaning of the sample, she mentioned that it suddenly felt like "an announcement of a new stage, a new world." It was especially the moment of "gathering" that made her connect the concept of a new place with the sample being processed: the Armenian protesters in Tehran had, on the date on which the source video was recorded, been gathering for 100 years. For Sarkissian, these gatherings symbolize the beginning of something new, announcing a new stage, a new world. In summary, the sample's

284

9   These quotes stem from a draft paper by Sarkissian and Woolmore outlining the concept of "Thresholds."

function shifted, from that of bringing in a vocal texture at a crucial point in the track while conveying (at least subliminally) the political topic of genocide awareness, to a literal announcement of the "new place" or "new world." The previous uncertainty as to whether Sarkissian would use the sample or not had finally been resolved.

The field report above not only illustrates the various stages of the sampling process. Among other aspects, direct or participant observations can also reveal various external and internal influences on the sampling process. The next section will pinpoint some of them.

The sample's function shifted, from that of bringing in a vocal texture at a crucial point in the track to a literal announcement of the "new place" or "new world."

Influences: Media, Place, and Habitus

It is not my aim here to provide an exhaustive list of all factors influencing and shaping this process of musical production. Such an endeavor would go substantially beyond the bounds of this study.[10] Other significant influencing factors have not been addressed here, such as that of economics. I want to highlight three fields that offer substantial insights: the influence of various media technologies and products, of place and space, and of habitus.

(a) Media

When using the concept of "media," I follow the "compound concept" of "medium" ("Medienkompaktbegriff") proposed by Siegfried J. Schmidt (2008). He distinguishes between four categories of media: instruments of communication (such as language), technologies (used to produce, distribute, and receive media products), institutions and organizations (that make use of media technologies), and products (such as books, journals, movies, and emails). The phenomenon of sampling touches all of these conceptual categories. Sampling processes sounds that can act as instruments of communication; it is itself a media technology; the process of sampling can be shaped by media institutions and organizations; and, with its ability to incorporate any sound wave, sampling potentially combines various media products.

The field report above first of all shows the involvement of various forms of media on different levels. Sarkissian researched her sampling material via Google and YouTube; the selected sample is a video from an online news channel (Ruptly); and the destination of the sample is a piece of electronic music. The transfer between the source medium (video) and the destination medium (music track) inevitably involves the loss of the source's visual information. But this information was crucial for the selection of the track, as

---

10   Such an enlarged study could apply theories such as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) from sociology, or the systems approach to creativity outlined by the psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi.

the field report has shown. During the research stage, Sarkissian virtuosically switched between various internet platforms and—beyond what was captured in my observation—also analog media products such as books (see her mention of the museum bookstore). In short, the producer draws inspiration from all kinds of media products that she has at hand at the time of production.

This virtuosic use of different media products also applies to other activities during the sampling process in particular and music production in general. We saw Sarkissian interrupt her work from time to time to check and answer emails or to access Facebook. She constantly switches between music production, reading, researching, and digital communication.

The processing of the protest sample in "Thresholds" touches on a question posed in the other case studies featuring sampling material taken from YouTube (Lara Sarkissian, Eomac, and M.E.S.H.). This is the question of how online platforms' algorithms influence—if not determine—the production of popular music. The search results prompted by our sampling producers' queries are dependent on algorithms (media technologies) that are, in turn, dependent on the users' search habits. This means that anything Sarkissian has done through her Google and YouTube account might influence what she finds when searching for new sampling material in the future.

This perspective on the use of media products in the process of sampling reveals the significance of technological infrastructure. A fast and stable internet connection was more important to the process than any particular studio gear. Several times during the observation sessions Sarkissian complained about the slow, interruption-prone internet. This did not substantially affect her sampling practice, as she always found a way to work with the samples that she wanted. Nevertheless, she had to stop the process several times in order to continue later.

A perspective on various forms of media has been widely neglected in previous research on sampling. In fact, media products and technologies determine *what* is sampled and *how fast* the process is. Media also shapes much of the immediate environment surrounding the process of musical production. Such a perspective can raise awareness of the influence of media products on music production in the digital age and the ensuing consequences, thus stimulating further research. I will continue this discussion in the concluding chapter.

Sarkissian constantly switches between music production, reading, researching, and digital communication.

286

→ Chapter 12

(b) Place and Space

I have so far mentioned two ways in which the immediate production environment (place) can both positively and negatively influence the production process: the poor internet connection, and Sarkissian's trips to the museum bookstore in search of sampling inspiration. There is another aspect to emphasize here that is related not so much to a particular geographical place, but to space in general.

Towards the end of the first session, tired after a long day of production, Sarkissian mentioned to her video partner that she missed making music on her own bed. When we talked about this a few days later, Sarkissian underlined the importance of her own private space:

How important is your bedroom for making music?
Pretty important.

Because the other day you said that you need your bedroom back.
[laughs out loud] **Yeah, we are literally in this studio surrounded by eight of the top monitors and I had it. I don't know. It's like what I'm used to at home. My room, being a bedroom producer** *[laughs]*. **That's what I'm good at. I've been reminded of production approaches that I was doing well there. (...)**

Is it important that it is your own bedroom, your home, or could this happen in a bedroom anywhere, could it be in a hotel room as well for example?
It's whatever my space is. Like even if it's a place where I'm staying, in a hotel or whatever as long as if it's my own space. Even the Airbnb: I like dimming the light exactly as I dim it at my house. *[laughs]* **These environments sometimes feel very sterile and very academic, you know the fluorescent light.**

These quotations show that Sarkissian considers a cozy and comfortable environment important for a successful production process. Her aim is to create a space where she can feel safe and confident. She knows that she is good at producing music in her own bedroom, and thus tried to replicate this situation at her residency abroad, even though she had access to a well-equipped studio.

(c) Habitus

When observing and analyzing the creative actions of human beings, the importance of the concept of "habitus," as coined by Pierre Bourdieu, cannot be denied. Defined as "a set of dispositions

which generates practices and perceptions" (Johnson 1993, 5), the habitus provides the framework in which the creative action of the producer takes place. A whole range of basic habits and principles of operation could be addressed in this context, such as *how* the producer produces music, *how* they listen to sound, and *what* they hear in it.

At this point, I want to underline the habitual influence on the sampling process, using the example of Sarkissian's use of model tracks. In preparation for the artist residency, Sarkissian took notes on production processes she had undertaken in previous (or model) tracks. These notes helped her to later draw on her own music production experiences; experiences that are clearly a part of the habitus. Hence, the practice of taking notes can be seen as a crutch for accessing habitus later. For the analyst, this is a helpful tool that makes the influence of the habitus manifest. Further (anthropological) research could analyze more aspects of habitus in relation to the sampling process.
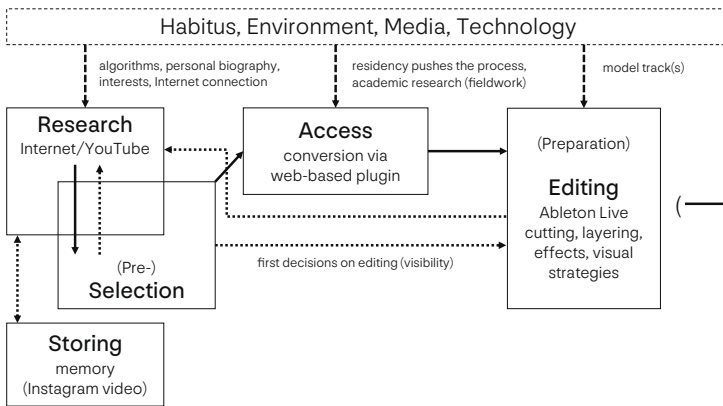
The habitus provides the framework in which the creative action of the producer takes place.

Figure 11.2: Sampling process in "Thresholds"

After a short summary of the sampling process observed in Lara Sarkissian's "Thresholds," I want to close this section by discussing two concluding thoughts. The first is the notion of interruption as a productive lens through which the musical practice of laptop producers can be analyzed, and the second regards the double functionality of sampling: the simultaneous emphasis on contextual and material aspects. Both sections will illustrate the potential of the methodical approach presented in this interlude to substantially expand the analysis of sample-based tracks. Based on the diagram developed in the beginning of this book, Figure 11.2 above summarizes the process of sampling observed.

All steps from the basic model are included. The storing stage is, however, only of marginal importance. It played a role when Sarkissian tried, without success, to access a video from her memory as potential sampling material. The continuous arrows indicate the linear succession of the stages in the process, while the dotted arrows show other, nonlinear connections. At the beginning of the process, the research and preselection stages were intertwined.

Sarkissian jumped back to research after having preselected sampling material, in order to look for other clips that would fit even better. Having finally selected the protest sample, Sarkissian made some initial decisions relating to the upcoming editing stage and the sample's visibility (for instance that the voice should not be comprehensible to listeners). At the end of the observation session, Sarkissian indicated that she might return to the first stage at home where she had a better and more stable internet connection. This is indicated by the long dotted line connecting the editing stage with the research stage. This did not lead to the selection of new sampling material, as I was able to find out later. Finally, the two observation sessions and my fieldwork could only cover a part of the entire production process. This is indicated by the arrow on the right margin pointing into emptiness.

This figure not only shows the multilevel nature of the sampling process, but also indicates the prominent involvement of (media) technology and media products such as the internet, the online platforms YouTube and Instagram, the web-based plugin for video conversion, and the DAW Ableton Live.

(a) Interruption

During the direct observation sessions, I noticed that the process of music production was repeatedly interrupted. As opposed to the image of a highly focused producer engaged in a continuous workflow—which might be a myth in any case—Sarkissian was interrupted not only by (digital) communication, but also by interference-prone technology (slow internet and crashing software). I thus conceive of the moment of interruption as constitutive for the sampling process in question. More than that: it might even be a key characteristic of Sarkissian's style of music production.

Interruption can be both productive and destructive. It is productive in cases where the process of production has stalled due to a lack of inspiration or energy. In these cases, interruption diverts from the production process and has the potential to act as a source of inspiration. Interruption is destructive when a fluent production process is interrupted. In these cases, interruption poses the risk of losing ideas and inspiration. On a metaphorical level, the idea of interruption could also be applied to two of the previous case studies: in "kenats", Lara Sarkissian interrupts male dominance through sampling, and in "STABILIZED, YES!," Vika Kirchenbauer aims to interrupt colonial power relations. The idea of interruption further corresponds to sampling in general, as a sample, by definition, is an excerpt from a greater source.

The metaphor of interruption could potentially serve as a productive lens through which to interpret sampling processes in particular and production processes in general. Interruption might be

Interruption can be both productive and destructive.

→ Chapter 7

→ Chapter 6

a characteristic feature of music production by laptop producers in the 21st century. These upcoming generations of artists have been raised with the possibilities and technologies of electronic communication. They are so-called "digital natives." Classical composer and performer Stefan Prins has described the compositional reality of "digital natives" as involving collecting materials and shaping ideas no longer in the conventional library, but on the internet (quoted after Großmann 2018, 8). Prins' description precisely characterizes the practice of the producers covered in this study. Moreover, with sampling, actions such as browsing the internet or exploring YouTube have become a crucial part of musical production, as this chapter has shown.

With sampling, actions such as browsing the internet or exploring YouTube have become a crucial part of musical production.

A thorough ethnography of the everyday musical practice of laptop producers remains to be conducted. This study only provides some initial insights and explorative questions. Further research could, for example, investigate the role and influence of an interruptive workflow on the production of music. It could examine whether there has been an increase in interruptive processes since the rise of electronic communication in the early 2000s, or if such processes were significant before. In terms of sampling, it would be interesting to compare the presumably "interruptive" practice of sampling artists with that of other music producers who do not rely on sampling in the same manner.

(b) Double Functionality of Sampling

The track examined here contained highly political sound material, in the form of a protest sample from Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. In the first observation session, the producer decided to keep the sample unrecognizable for the listener. The reasons for this creative and strategic decision might have been diverse, and have a substantial influence on how the track will later be received. A thorough examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter.

However, focusing on the process of production makes it clear that samples are often charged with at least two equal functions. As I have illustrated in the preceding case studies—with the exception of COOL FOR YOU's "STABILIZED, YES!"—sampling artists do not select their materials exclusively for either contextual (focus on layers of meaning of the source context) or material reasons (focus on aesthetic parameters). Often, the decision to sample a particular sound combines both approaches.

In the current example, the sample has an aesthetic function (bringing in vocal texture) on the one hand, and a topical and structural function (the announcement of the new world) on the other. The producer has carefully defined the degrees of visibility of each function: the first is perceivable while the second is almost completely hidden. From the producer's point of view, both functions

are crucial, and both are needed to successfully complete the sampling process. Moreover, as this chapter has shown, the second of the two functions only evolved during the production process and was not set from the beginning. A thorough analysis of sampling processes must thus reveal various layers of functionality by discussing the different degrees of visibility and the varying reasons behind them.

In relation to the case studies featured in this book, we can draw the following conclusions from this interlude: (1) the hidden sampling of political messages is significant. It is important for the producer to know that a particular message is part of the track, though it is not necessarily important to make this message obvious to the listener. (2) Reasons for sampling can change, shift, or expand during the process of production. When analyzing sampling processes only on the basis of released tracks, it is difficult—often perhaps impossible—to differentiate between initial motivations or functions and those that emerged later. It is also hard to trace motivations and functions that were lost during the process of production.

This chapter has so far offered a close insight into the factory of music production. In the second part of this chapter, I will critically discuss methodical challenges and opportunities arising from this experiment.

A thorough analysis of sampling processes must reveal various layers of functionality by discussing the different degrees of visibility and the varying reasons behind them.

Methodological Considerations

The methodological approach proposed in this chapter has resolved one of the main problems faced in the previous chapters' retrospective analyses: it allowed access to the sampling process in the moment of action. It also raised new questions and challenges: what can I really observe in such sessions (usability of data)? When am I allowed to take part (intimacy of the observed situation)? How can I catch the crucial moments (spontaneity of the observed processes)? Of course, these questions are not exceptional, and touch on core issues relating to conducting fieldwork in cultural anthropology. However, they are particularly relevant to the subjects studied here: laptop producers.

In this section, I will critically discuss the challenges and limitations of conducting anthropological fieldwork among laptop producers. This discussion will directly connect to Chapter 2, where I reflected on the challenges and limitations of a focus on sampling practices. I will finally end with a call for the increased study of laptop producers in popular music. The section is structured according to two central phases of the research process: gaining access and conducting fieldwork.

Phase I: Gaining Access to Fieldwork

I enquired about the possibility of conducting fieldwork with the producer Lara Sarkissian early on in my research. Initially, I wanted to visit Sarkissian in her private surroundings (San Francisco, U.S.). I was hoping to get insights into her musical and social environment. I wanted to witness the place where the track "kenats" was produced, and hoped to attend production sessions of one or several new tracks. From the beginning, Sarkissian principally supported my idea. However, the logistics were complicated. The end of the story is known: I finally conducted limited fieldwork during Sarkissian's artist residency in Germany.

There were various reasons why I could not realize my initial plan. Sarkissian later told me that she had been experiencing private issues at that time. After the death of a close family member, she and her family were forced to move. Moving house in the highly gentrified area in and around San Francisco is not easy, to say the least. Beyond these familial issues, she had concerns about generating income. She had taken jobs in the film industry in San Francisco, along with other freelance work, while pursuing musical projects simultaneously. These jobs not only impeded the long-term scheduling of musical activities but also influenced the spontaneous artistic process. In interviews, she described her lack of motivation to produce music after having spent the day working in front of a screen. In this way, Sarkissian's work directly affected her musical production process. A third and perhaps crucial factor making it impossible for her to commit to the planned fieldwork were her musical activities:

> *There is just a lot happening at the moment and decisions I am making currently with work and music projects that just make it very unpredictable to know where I will be at even in the summertime (big chance I won't be in the States then) and contracts I am signing/making decisions on. Can be shifting things in where I will be at. This makes it very hard to confirm/commit in advance.*

> *What makes things most difficult is how I co-run a label with my collaborator and have had a lot of requests for projects and collaborations and a lot of traveling, administrative/organizing type work is what consumes most of my times in periods like that, so it's very hard to tell if I'll be able to work on music during those times.*

Sarkissian invested increasing effort into her label and network Club Chai. This translated into increased requests for DJ sets, compilation projects, and collaboration tracks, as well as into a growing

interest from music journalists in covering her work.[11]

Due to all these developments, Sarkissian was not able to confirm a concrete date for my fieldwork. In the end, the growing interest in her music nevertheless offered me a chance to conduct limited fieldwork. The ISM Hexadome project in Germany was attractive enough to Sarkissian in terms of artistic possibilities, public outreach (that might stimulate her musical career), and financial compensation.

I presume that many laptop producers similarly find themselves juggling private issues, day jobs, and musical activities. Their plans may change with little notice, and opportunities to expand on their musical projects might entail an increase in travel and costs. This, in turn, has inevitable implications for the researcher wishing to investigate the producer's musical practice. Long-term scheduling is difficult, if not impossible, and when fieldwork does finally happen, it is never clear when the artist will be working on music.

Phase II: Conducting Fieldwork

The first challenge faced by a researcher who finally gains access is the problem of intimacy. For most artists, music production is a highly intimate process, meaning they are often not comfortable being observed. While this might be valid for artists in general, I assume that it is particularly the case for laptop producers. They usually produce in private spaces, often their own bedrooms. Observing a production session might therefore mean literally entering the producer's bedroom. A careful approach to the situation is thus required from the researcher. This challenge might become even greater in the case of young producers who are inexperienced in sharing moments of production with outsiders or other musical collaborators.

Observing a production session might mean literally entering the producer's bedroom.

293

In my own case, I understood that Sarkissian did not want me to be constantly present in the background. Hence, we initially agreed on periodical interviews and a small number of limited observation sessions. She postponed meetings several times during my fieldwork, either because she was not available or because she was not focusing on sampling at the time.

The second challenge involves catching the crucial moments of production. This became especially pronounced due to my narrow focus on sampling, as opposed to an open interest in music production in general. As shown above, I was lucky with my first observation session, though the "luck" was not accidental, as Sarkissian had invited me to the session for a reason. "You came at the right time," she remarked at the end of the session. "I wanted you to come in when I was actually sampling or going through things."

11 During my research (2016–2018), online music blogs such as FACT magazine, Resident Advisor, and Tiny Mix Tapes increasingly reported on Club Chai and Lara Sarkissian's activities.

However, the situation was completely different in the second session. By including the notes from this session, I wanted to show the range of possible experiences a researcher can encounter in the field.

I also faced difficulties in accessing different moments in Sarkissian's sampling processes because of the very nature of her workflow. As we saw, the producer jumped back and forth between the stages, even working on some of them in her hotel room or Airbnb apartment. The spontaneity of the production process exceeds every setting of observational fieldwork and requires regular interviews and the immediate recapitulation of the production stages in question.

The field notes from the second session also point to a third challenge, regarding the usability of data: what can we really draw from such a session? Sarkissian's laptop had only one output, so she could either use headphones or an external computer screen, but never both at the same time. When she worked with the studio speakers and the laptop screen (as in the first session) I could follow what she was doing acoustically, but had to be very close to her to be able to see what she was doing on the screen. This raised the risk of disturbing her production process through my presence. Conversely, when she worked with headphones and on the external screen (as in the second session), I could not hear what she was working on but had a good visual impression of the process. The researcher thus needs the appropriate technical equipment to be able to create the ideal setting for both him/herself and the artist.

What helped—at least during the first observation session—was the presence of Sarkissian's project partner, Jemma Woolmore. From time to time, Sarkissian explained to her what she was doing—for example, describing the sample material she was exploring. These immediate comments on her activities were valuable for my research. She did not direct them to me, which led me to further infer that she was able to ignore my presence to a certain degree.

Outlook: Fieldwork among Laptop Producers

The researcher faces various challenges when planning fieldwork among laptop producers. The producer's often semi-professional or precarious music-making conditions and/or increased traveling activities substantially impede access to fieldwork. The intimate production setting, and the spontaneity of the processes being examined, further challenge conventional fieldwork.

I see two possible solutions to these problems. The first would be to conduct conventional long-term anthropological fieldwork. This would allow the establishment of a reliable network, and would potentially create a range of opportunities to witness crucial moments of musical production. However, I do not consider this

method ideal for a focus as specialized as the one I have taken here. Long-term fieldwork only reveals its full strength if larger groups and networks, instead of individual actors, are observed.[12]

Based on the experience of my own research, I would instead suggest another method. I want to encourage the creation of laboratory-like production settings that can be of substantial benefit for both researcher and artist. Similar to the artist residency in Karlsruhe, we could establish collaborations between universities and art and music schools, or other institutions such as the ZKM. These collaborations could design artistic projects for laptop producers resulting in releases or performances, and combine them with academic observation. These projects could take place in multiple locations, even within the producer's usual producing environment. The crucial point is that these projects would be financed, thereby enabling artists to focus on musical production in a condensed period. Of course, such a laboratory-like method would also require a critical reflection on its limitations.

> *I want to encourage the creation of laboratory-like production settings that can be of substantial benefit for both researcher and artist.*

In general, I see three major areas to investigate through further research on laptop producers: (1) such research affords insights into processes of creative decision-making. Due to problems of access, this field is notoriously understudied. (2) We can learn more about the lived realities of a considerable number of actors in the contemporary musical landscape. Since the rise of digital production tools, along with the means of electronic communication, the profile of the laptop producer has risen steadily. And (3), I presume that the profile of a laptop producer is more attractive to certain groups of people than to others—a hypothesis that must still be proven. Some laptop producers manage to jump from semi-professional to professional status, while others do not, or do not want to. Neglecting research on laptop producers would mean overlooking the significance of this group of people in music.

12   In the area of sampling studies, Joseph Schloss's (2014 [2004]) seminal study on hip hop producers in the U.S. serves as an example of long-term fieldwork.