

THE LISTENING BIENNIAL / READER

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Searching stealth, not silence

ISRAEL MARTÍNEZ

I understand stealth as a condition, a state or a situation even that allows a mild flow of information that is intimate, vital, almost secret, regularly clear. I link it to the territories that legendary Mexican writer Juan Rulfo shared with us, portraying with unlimited clarity the noises of silence between death and life, thus breaking the (useless? conceited?) binary thinking between “noise” and “silence”, between what is and what’s not music that has been the basis of numerous essays, for example, on “the silent piece” by John Cage, and its many remakes and covers. Literature has, undoubtedly, a greater imaginative potential around sound than what has been developed by focusing on its physical production in several other fields.

I conceive of stealth, quietness, as an “enabler” or “maximizer” of experiences and sensations: to listen and talk (the most logical conceptions), but also to get closer to literature, to cook, to taste

food and drink, to smell with greater concentration, to wander and “get lost”, to be critical, to self-evaluate, to sharpen our sight, to encourage imagination, to rethink our relationship with time, to appease thoughts, to feel our bodies, to become sexier (as Einstürzende Neubauten proposed in its only concert in Mexico twenty years ago). This might sound banal and even somewhat new agey, but bear with me: It could be necessary in our grizzly present which is neither characterized by a rebellious nor a radical stridency, but trivialized by the extreme saturation we receive and partake in one way or another at all times, and that usually only flows towards the economic benefit of the big capital owners.

I intuit stealth as a political tool, as part of a resistance methodology, as a bridge to listen and share better, that allows us to act bluntly after that necessary pause, especially nowadays when we have no answers to more urgent questions, or citing the Chto Delat collective, that the questions have been changed when we thought we had the answers. I think about the Mexican March of Silence on September 13, 1968, or The Silent March of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) on December 21, 2012.

It is not true that silence only denotes apathy, repression or defeat, nor that megaphones, shouts and public demonstrations are the most effective forms of protest. Thinking that is falling into the “noise vs. silence” dichotomy. Stealth inserts those critical and often contradictory possibilities that we need to assume to deliver new ideas. Stealth can be an alternative to binary thinking: heterosexual or homosexual, white or black, capitalist or communist, good or bad, etc., criticized by Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado for wreaking havoc on the way we process any matter.

Stealth, I believe, is an option today.

to keep secrets sound for a shareable future

YANG YEUNG

1.

In the language I was born into – Cantonese, there is a colloquial that goes, literally, “Wintermelon-Tofu” (dung1 gwaa1 dau6 fu6 冬瓜豆腐). It is not so commonly used these days for being a little old-fashioned. I love it though, for the shapes the characters draw around them and the sounds they make.

A friend translates it as “anything can happen”. It is a wonderfully lively translation. It keeps the humour as much as the caution the phrase suggests. Say, we might be joking about someone preparing for the possibility of being caught in a storm when hiking. So just in case, we bring an emergency kit with a whistle, an emergency blanket, and a flash light, to prepare for “Wintermelon-Tofu”. Or, in the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, many protestors were

reported to have carried wills with them – some written on their helmets, others buried in their backpacks. “Wintermelon-Tofu”. The caution is for possible injury. The humour is to keep an essential lightness in the seriousness of the just-in-case. The phrase isn’t associated with listening, but I always hear a splash, a thud, an underwater rumbling with the phrase. What there is to hear depends on what sinks or stays afloat. It depends also on the depth of water and the hardness of ground in which and upon which the Winter Melon and/ or Tofu is each and are together thrown.

As we are caught in a sensibility of uncertainty caused by natural and humanly-devised means, I think a lot, as many in the art community do, what art can do. Even when the certainty that it can do little creeps in more and more, I think of what artists keep doing anyway. For what purpose? Perhaps that there are still compelling reasons to care, which listening encourages.

When Brandon LaBelle’s email arrived from the other side of the ocean inviting me to co-curate the Listening Biennial, I felt happily led to both the leeward and windward slopes of mountains. Be it rain or shine by way of rapidly changing circumstances the global pandemic directs, he and my buddy-curators and buddy-artists are ready to offer something – of the habitual and the extraordinary. The email’s timeliness, and the conviction and warmth it communicates are inspiring. Timeliness – for insofar as we keep connecting by fingering on our phones to exchange a wish, a hug, a gentle hello, we might as well tap into the capacities we also have but may have forgotten or have been too busy with other things to recognize – as J.K. Gibson-Graham puts it, “‘the cultivation of subjects’ for ‘community enterprises and initiatives’ of postcapitalist ‘new commons’.” (Holert 40) Conviction – for insisting that distance can be transformed not only into proximity, but also intimacy. Warmth – for the heart from which the email was sent and received.

I asked Brandon what brought him to make the Listening



Biennial. He referred to one source in particular: Luce Irigaray's book *The Way of Love*. I resonate a lot with what Irigaray says about welcoming the other. "To experience this co-belonging implies leaving representative thought and letting oneself go in the co-belonging to Being which already inhabits us, constitutes us, surrounds us. It presupposes, in fact, dwelling "there where we truly already are." (70) However, I cannot fully agree with her when she lets the "unity" of our being settle onto the compulsory complementarity of heterosexuality, and of the differently-sexed bodies. "Each part of what constitutes the unity of the human species corresponds to a proper being and a proper Being, to an identity of one's own. In order to carry out the destiny of humanity, the man-human and the woman-human each have to fulfil what they are and at the same time realize the unity that they constitute." (105) If we take atom into account, we may have a different story of our "unity" to tell. To be fair, though, Irigaray's argument is primarily grounded on the importance of recognizing difference, and the differences between sexed bodies would be one part of co-belonging. "To consider this relation as a co-belonging of man and woman in the constitution of human identity requires rethinking what being-in-relation itself implies." (90) The variety of ways of co-belonging requires another curatorial and life project. For the purpose here, I am interested in how artists lend attention to differences manifested less in socially circulated and established identities than those arising and produced out of contingent situations – what capacities do they activate to negotiate between unity and singularity in a listening situation. My hunch is, if one gets lucky, listening with attention enables such questions as "What moves?" and "What is it that moves us?" The pandemic has the potential to knock us out of the sensitivity that listening grants us. From where we are, with what we have access to, can we re-discover the listening body in relation to the world, incorporating the pandemic-induced habits, and find intimacy in human connection again?

By way of love, moving along the lines the word and its sound draw around itself, I present to you Wah-yan Au, Michele Chu, Yannick Dauby, Sharon Lee, Alecia Neo, Wantanee Siripattananuntakul, and Raheleh (Minoosh) Zoromodinia. Their works may not generate sound, but they channel its imagination through varying modes of listening. In their works, one gets the chance to learn to listen not to that which sounds out, but to mobility and immobility constituted by social and political challenges, fictionality and historicity constituted by the inadequacy of immediate realities, and rhetoricity that does not persuade by oratory and speech but by evocation. In their works, listening is activated not in the ears as isolated sensory organs, but as a bodily compartment that moves back and forth between oneself and the worlds it is fully immersed in. They show us the state of being together is less a combination of will power than an acceptance of that being already a condition that makes us who we are while also calling for effort and courage that we face, learn from, and overcome our solitude. For the Listening Biennial, they devise "listening situations" in which we may experience loss, but also possibilities of being found by others as much as ourselves. A situation is where anything can happen. All of their works carry an element of porousness. To be implicated in a situation is to be called to respond. All of their works do so with care, or, they care by constellating, in the way Le Guin imagines it:

Mind draws the lines between the stars
that let the Eagle and the Swan
fly vast and bright and far
above the dark before the dawn.

Between two solitary minds
as far as Deneb from Altair,
love flings the unimaginable line
that marries fire to fire.

2.

Wah-yan Au and Yannick Dauby each lends attention to non-human voices in forests and urban concrete jungles. Their collaborative work compels us to ask, How does the air change? What does the wind bring? Wah-yan Au has a print-making and story-telling practice, while Yannick Dauby has a field recording and sonic ethnographic practice. For the Listening Biennial, they collaborate for the first time, responding to each other's love of all living beings. They conjure their habitats as trembles and vibrations that impregnate every moment. They lead us into a world whose vitality is generous to our wrong-doings: I am thinking of Wah-yan Au's bats trapped in a supermarket, and Yannick Dauby's bleached coral reefs. I share with you what has inspired Yannick Dauby, and goes on to inspire Wah-yan Au and myself as their collaboration evolves:

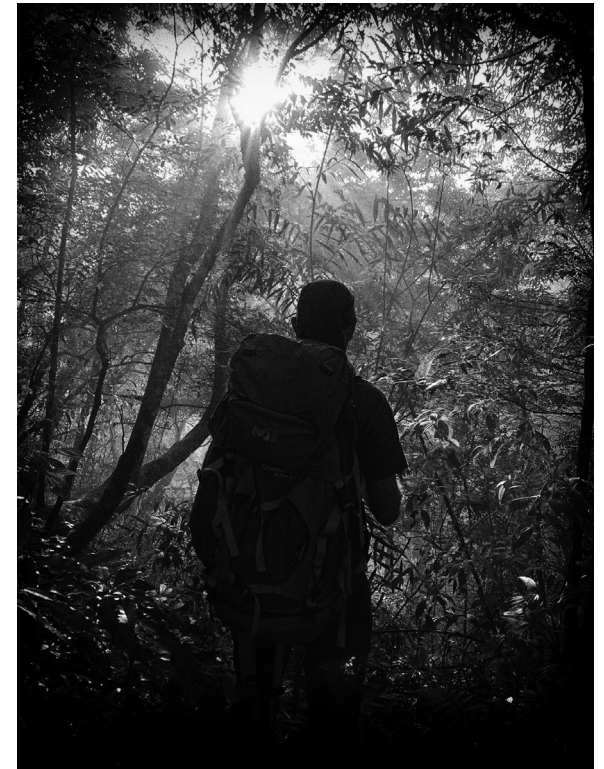
A number of objects like this, many of them fragmentary, have arrived, perhaps by meteor. You are to inspect them and arrive at the conclusion that they are the remains of living things. How would you arrive at that conclusion? What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the back-ward schizophrenic in another? (Bateson)

In the series of audio musings they make for the radio, Wah-yan Au's voice brings the stories from her book *Dreams of a Toad* alive, while Dauby makes patterns around them, for a different kind of connection. Fantastical beings: fantastical being as our way of being.

Sharon Lee's photographic practice is tactile. She works with light and darkness as material. She is interested not only in what the camera frames, but what the lens, the film, in their contact with

the world, can do – it's action research on photography. The rapidly changing political environment in Hong Kong in recent years has prompted her to, more urgently (though not exclusively), confront with the way state apparatuses compress urban shared lives. In a recent public art work in a park, she invites passers-by to make a wish when they see a rainbow conjuring above a fountain in the afternoon sunlight. The wish was made in silence. The artist observes, listens, without being able to hear. As the ritual goes, one doesn't tell one's wish because doing so would fail it. Is to make a wish the last resort when one is in despair? For the Listening Biennial, the artist furthers the complex state of making a wish by proposing that to wish well is a way to make home within, to carry hope around, everywhere necessary when one is in exile in a place once called home. Wishes made in the past stand between pages of books; those made in the past remain secrets, just as the ones evoked in the present.

Michele Chu presents a practice of experiential design in urban public space that sets up terms of engrossment that challenge routine policies of separation and social atomization. By design, I don't mean the ubiquitous kind serving corporate interests. I mean she designs by transforming her body into a vehicle for the formation of alternative human relations. She plays on ready-made, ordinary objects to set up situations for her encounter with strangers. She creates in open-air plazas and semi-confined spaces like train compartments and restaurants. In focusing on such themes as intimacy, fear, estrangement, she takes risks, necessary for exploring what engaged citizenship might look like. For the Listening Biennial, she choreographs situations in public space involving touch, verbal conversation and eye contact, using such materials prevalent in the pandemic as foam boards and hand sanitizers as a response to the subtle shifts in human relations during the pandemic. Chance makes connecting possible. Making and sharing shelters becomes both a means and an end in itself. In her interventions, she evokes hearing as co-extensive



with the perceptual field constituted by all other senses – even when unevenly distributed, a holistic communication vital for rejuvenation in our troubled times is encouraged.

Alecia Neo is interested in hospitality, particularly in times where human differences could become a source of fear and antagonism. Her work is a response to such disenfranchised communities as refugees and migrant workers, as well as the tension between professional and unpaid care work, by creating situations for connection and reconciliation. Neo's artistic inquiry in care stems from a profound trust in the human capacity to learn our insufficiencies and overcome them in a supportive environment. This is one reason for her practice being highly collaborative. She works with movement artists, poets, film-makers, with herself taking up various creative positions, to inquire into the complex web of needs, feelings, goals, and challenges that arise out of a caring relationship. The artist becomes a learner following the gestures of caring, a host making space for caring, and an observer and listener tending to the qualities of care brought out of one's best self. (Noddings) One has to be willing to be vulnerable, and surrender, for healing to come. For the Listening Biennial, Neo re-enacts the gestures of care she learns from her collaborators in Singapore and India. She shares the process and results of the learning with participants – who then become learners, transferring touch. She also extends her open call for gestures of care for the ongoing project "Care Index" – a scenery that obliges us to take a stroll in, and to care. Care Index was supported under the Dance Nucleus' ELEMENT Research Residency in June 2021.

Wantanee Siripattananuntakul has a research-based practice that draws from her concern and perplexities over the multiple and entangled ways regimes of political power exercise control over those subjected to their power. While politically concerned and informed, her work suspends political discourse to preserve the subtleties of feeling and being in and with power. She approaches the con-

tentious laterally, defying any simplistic relation between Authority (that claims power) and the People (deprived of power). She explores how unfreedom manifests in an individual's life. For the Listening Biennial, she presents "She Sings a Voiceless Song". A woman mouths a song employed in the history of Thailand against enemies as changing ruling regimes define them. It compels questions as to how a singing voice corroborates with that which seeks to silence it, how a muted voice centres and dissipates attention, and whether silence is a choice, has a force, or is burdened by uneasy compromises. Resistance may have no face, just as totalizing power deafens itself with its own roar. What, in the end, are we hearing? What we read from the moving lips is much more than one native tongue could inscribe. The artist will also share her creative processes of this work among others in a live chat based in Hong Kong and open to all online, "What politics?! Troubles that make artists laugh today".

Raheleh (Minoosh) Zoromodinia presents a practice that explores the meaning of belonging. Walking in urban space and the height of mountains alone and with others, she moves between memories and imaginaries of home. She recontextualizes ritualistic practices from particular traditions into contemporary geo-political contentions, preserving the tensions. For the Listening Biennial, she presents her video works "Sensation" and "Resist", in which the artist's body wrestles with an emergency blanket in gusty winds. The body is at once caught and surrendering, while also braving and standing up to what nature offers it. The tinge of humour the work conjures wrestles with the gravity of human vulnerability. The more one stands with her in the wind that sculpts her body, the more one becomes sensitive to what it might be like to be both exposed and sheltered by as much as detached and engaged due to conditions not up to us. The appearance of nonchalance is deceptive: she shows the face of sturdy defiance. Raheleh (Minoosh) Zoromodinia also presents a "walkshop" for the Listening Biennial. She prompts participants to

take a walk with her at a distance, in places she does not know, but is curious to. Can belonging be shared from where we think we already know, with whom we think we do not know? Trajectories of the walks become maps of one's self-making.

Empathy is conventionally understood as the ability to project oneself to the other's situation. Nel Noddings proposes otherwise: it's in receptivity, not projection, that empathy begins. Her proposition is an important reminder that to claim we know more than we can imagine or bear is to lose touch with such subjectivities as pain that is "absolute". (Scarry) When the claim we know becomes bigger than the process of moving ourselves into the person, we fail; we become our own borders. But this doesn't mean we can give up on empathy. I think it is not an either or between projection and reception. All the artists mentioned above offer help as we sustain efforts to live together. The back and forth is equivalent to the way listening teaches receptivity. We insist going back and forth so we are not cut off from the enticing and comforting but misleading claim that we know all. To be situated in listening could be confining, it could also be liberating. The reason might be the same: we keep reconsidering and practicing that which we oblige ourselves to.

Are we in transition into some new phase of our history of being together? I hear 20TH century Chinese thinker Lu Xun (Leys) murmuring to himself, leaking a little of his voice to us in our here-now:

I naturally believe that there will be a future, but I do not waste my time imagining its radiant beauty.

Rather than discussing how to reach the future, it seems to me that we ought to think first about the present. Even if the present is desperately dark, I do not wish to leave it.

Will tomorrow be free from darkness? We'll talk about that tomorrow. Meanwhile, let us busy ourselves with transforming today.

I imagine Lu as a listening, walking, thinking self, visiting us with hope. Walking with us, hearing his own footsteps amidst ours, he adds, "Hope can be neither affirmed nor denied. Hope is like a path in the countryside: originally there was no path – yet, as people are walking all the time in the same spot, a way appears."

The way then is up to us – what and how we follow, if we are to at all.

June 1, 2021

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Listening – Sound Narratives of a Dance

SARA MIKOLAI

Through a practice of listening, I engage with manifold layers, which inform, influence and shape my approach to dance. Actively listening to dance encourages to perceive movement not only through the eyes, but through the sense of hearing. By doing this I learn to stay present, unlearn and relearn meanings attached to the sound source, as the practice of listening requires an openness towards what is being listened to. Not seeking one particular answer, this practice developed from my continued engagement with epistemologies of dance: a field in particular pressured by questions of representation and gaze, as it is an art form dealing with what is closest to us: the body. The foundation of my dance training is Bharatanatyam, a descendant of the temple and court dances of India¹. These practices of the Devadasis – the temple dancers –, which is referred to as the origins of this dance, has gone through a complex history of diverse local contexts and reali-

ties, to the abolishment through the colonial powers and is today performed as this reinvented form known as Bharatanatyam. Today it is learned in many regions of South Asia and the diaspora. After training and performing this form since childhood, I took a break to comprehend the meaning of a form being developed from a ritual dance to what is today called a classical dance and the confusing contradictions it comes with.

This writing addresses how a listening practice enables me to re-enter the vocabulary, music, philosophy, mythology and somatics of the dance, to more deeply comprehend what it teaches about the body, as well as the body's inner and outer relations in dance and everyday life. The writing makes space for thinking about how this listening practice can be understood as a proposal to critically, openly and poetically engage with passed on knowledge through decolonial strategies, queer reclamations and ecological reflections. Insisting on a commitment to this dance and practices close to it and staying with the trouble, not only in theory but within an artistic practice, is a response to the prejudiced dichotomies of tradition² and progress and the consequences of past and present day marginalisation and discrimination of *othered* bodies, practices and methodologies of knowledge production. In the sections that follow, I introduce the different modes of listening central to my practice: listening to dance itself as a sonic experience; listening to the sounds of the environment; listening to music/sound compositions; listening to personal and historical narratives.

ON SOUNDS OF TREES AND TRANSFORMING SKINS

Each time I go for a walk and the wind blows through the branches of a tree – in the urban space with a strangely measured distance to another – I listen to those branches beginning to wave and the

leaves clapping against each other. It is my favourite song, my favourite dance. Hundreds of little tingling sounds played by foliage, a collective consisting of single leaf members, reflecting colours of themselves, of each other, of the sun and what is around them. I have noticed that this way of listening pulls me to the present and helps me to breathe. It tingles under my skin, which feels as if it expands into the space. It is as if the boundary between my body and the space it is surrounded by softens. I feel how the space breathes through me and I through the space. It makes me feel small and wide at the same time: small as I realize how much more I need this exchange than the tree does and wide as I begin to feel not separate, but part of it. A blurring of entities in space, recognizing the commonalities while embracing the differences. When stepping into waters it is a particularly vibrant version of space getting in touch with my skin. Kindly carrying my body, splashing drops into my eyes and eardrums, changing my experience of sound as a child of the city and its constant urban drone. I would take walks in the forest with occasional dips into lakes, listening to organisms I am surrounded by and notice that by listening I could understand better. Not necessarily by defining the sound of what I am listening to and aiming to put it into a human-made word, but by letting be what is and letting me be what I am. And in doing so, the visual sense, which so quickly cognitively links with the habit of defining what is thought to be seen and the judgment it comes with, has changed for me. This may as well be what the practice of meditation does. If I think of it, I can call this a kind of meditation, that allows movement and activates a certain mindfulness towards the environment, my body and situating one in the other.

The feeling in my body and skin while doing this practice of listening also guides back to mythological stories and the language of Bharatanatyam. Stories and dances my mother has taught me. And so I relate the experience of the forest walks to South Asian myths of celestial beings represented as mountains, waters, plants and curious

hybrids of beings. Already in the *namaskaram*, a small sequence before each dance, Bhūma Devi, representing Mother Earth, is saluted, by guiding a touch from the ground to the eyes with the hands. A simple gesture of acknowledgement. Listening to trees may just be something like that.

OF SONGS, FLUID BODIES, TEACHINGS OF A MOTHER AND BLURRED BORDERS

lalita lavanga latA pariSeelana kOmala malaya sameerE
A cool breeze of spring season
from clove bushes is gently blowing
 — Ashtapadi, song 3

I remember when my mother taught me the Asthapadis of the *Gita Govinda*: a poetry work of songs and hymns about Radha, “a subversive and all-too human emblem of mortal and divine love” (Lal, Malashri; Gokhale, Namita, 2018, p.1) and Krishna, a forest cowherd and deity countering hegemonic masculinity, composed in the 12th century by the poet Jeyadeva: here I have learned for the first time to not only use the *mudras*³ used in dance as separate movements in order to narrate a story, but to move them fluidly through space, depicting for example a leaf going from one, to the next, to another. Connected, not disrupted. This way of fluidly moving through space, even if only with the hands, within this rather rigid and geometrical form Bharatanatyam has become, has shifted my understanding of *abhinaya*⁴ – the emotive telling of a story. It opened up more flexible possibilities of connecting the imaginary (the leaf in the story), the real (my present body) and blurring the two. If I apply this mode of being fluid in a *nritta* (abstract dance) moment, even this moment gets filled with emotion. By doing this, I experience that not direct-

ly representing or telling a story does not mean that emotion is absent. We experience this especially in instrumental sound and music works. Using a *mudra* fluidly rather than rigidly, opens up space in my joints. Space, which is more than mere anatomy. Space that is filled with energy and emotion. And so *abhinaya* begins to emerge, even without a direct acting out of a story line, which *bhava* (expressive technique in the performing arts), is often reduced to. I am curious to explore these moments, by being present through an interplay of moving, listening, pausing, resting and how that transforms, transmits and becomes what is called *rasa*⁵, an intangible emotive space. Even though my first encounter with the Ashtapadi is around 17 years ago, it deeply impacts my practice of today more consciously within an embodied philosophy of being fluid in dance and life. In conventional trainings body and gender fluidity within our dance traditions are neither discussed, nor linked. But it is very much there, right in front of us, in the many mythologies of transforming, multi- and cross-hybrid deities, where set categorizations of gender and fluid forms of intimacies are absurd. To me this multiplicity of fluidity as both imaginary and lived are deeply connected.

The popularity of the Ashtapadi songs crosses states from the deep South to the North and East of the subcontinent. I imagine that this has to do with the sensuous quality of the narration, as well as the sound of the music compositions, which merge and melt from one tone and word to the next. I wonder if this compositional fluidity is connected to the local practices of where the *Gita Govinda* was written, in Orissa. In their local dance practice Odissi I observe a sensual fluidity of the body curving through sculptural postures, unlike in Bharatanatyam, where sensuality is rather frowned upon, which can be traced back to the abolishment of the dance as the Devadasis were stigmatized as sex-workers. With the reinvention in the early 20th century, spine movements were quite literally stiffened for acceptance. Reflecting on the latter has helped me to rethink the boundaries creat-

ed through the borders of the colonial and neocolonial idea of the nation state, by looking at the commonalities and influences of the different dance and music practices, while embracing the differences.

When I began to allow the fluidity learned through the Ashtapadi sink into my chest and hips, it began to curve my spine, which soon felt like throwing a stone into the water – a cause and effect of waves and shifts until it is time to rest. Listening to these compositions with the same intention as I do to trees and waters, expands possibilities of working with the movement vocabulary of this dance background. It becomes less about set choreographies, but more about ephemeral moments of a body in motion. To me, a sense for fluidity has become crucial for my listening: both defy hierarchical and categorizational conditions. I can't listen unbendingly if I genuinely want to listen. And further I can't move rigidly, if I genuinely do listen. Metaphorically, but also quite literally in terms of how to hold, position or move my body when I listen and vice versa. Sitting on a chair or lying on a floor completely changes the way the sound reaches the ear and hence the whole experience. The same would apply to a moving body. Adding fluid qualities to this practice is certainly not a requirement, but it makes the somatic experience of both listening and dancing so much richer.

LISTENING TO DANCE

A ball, inside a ball. Thrusting, stroking, banging, rolling, falling. Standing still. A metal ball, inside another ball of brass. Moving when the body moves and continuing to stroke the coating even if the body pauses. A matter of microseconds. It is like hearing one's pulse in stillness. Or hearing the waves of the water in the distance, when one just quiets down for a moment. Or the birds, or the clapping of leaves on each other on a windy day. Or hearing the absence of it. The bird



not present, the trees not present. Other beings – not present. The *Salangai*, footbells, used in many Indian dances are a sound signifier of movement. The experience of dance with and without the bells is of tremendous difference. The soundscape created by dance through the bells creates an incomparable sensorial experience, not only to the outside, but already from the interior experience of being the dancer. In early years I have often been disappointed by the rare usage of the footbells being reserved for moments of public performances. But as an instrument to me the *Salangai* offer more than a mere amplification of movement in hours when a piece has been trained to perfection. The relationship of instrument and body suggests that the dance is not only a dance, but a sonic experience, a music piece in itself, as part of a dance. It expresses that the dance becomes more present and alive, through its sound and not only through an added music piece. This is especially noticeable in northern Kathak dance and its intense footwork creating vast soundscapes. It indeed can be understood as a direct translation of movement into sound, but at the same time it has its own life, resonating back to the body in a way that has its own response, like all acoustic instruments do, in particular those in close proximity to the body. This can be well heard in the use of the northern Thai instrument *phin pia*, a string zither, where the chest is used to resonate the sound. When the body is still, the bells tied around the ankles still resonate to minor movements of the muscles, little cracks in the ankle joints and pulsation of the blood. This tells me tales of presence and absence, of silence and noise, of movement and stillness.

What if I do not only dance in set rhythms? What if the way I move the hand *mudra* in the Ashtapadi resonates into my foot and initiates another movement, another sound? What if a curved spine sounds different in the ankle bells? What are the different volumes at play: the volume of the body, the volume of movement, the volume of sound, the volume of space? How can I explore the differ-

ent types of resonances: the resonance of the bells and the resonance of the body? What if a dance is a song and a song is a dance? How does hearing myself dance affect the movement? And why is a dancer in these dance practices both dancer and musician? The traditional training involves not only dance, but also the study of *sollukattus* – the rhythmic language for dance and percussion –, singing the compositions and understanding the *ragas* and texts in various languages, mostly Tamizh, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi. I indeed understand the content better with the information through language, but why is sound and voice in a performance today conventionally given to another person? Why have all these entities, being part of one dance practice, been separated in the performance? Why has it become something to remain in studio and study chambers and the musical arrangements fully been given to an orchestra? I understand the beauty of the collaboration between musician and dancer. But is that so that the dancer has more capacity to perfect the form and if so, is this for reasons of entertainment aesthetics as part of the modern era of dance, influenced by ideologies and staging of ballet? If my reasons to dance are not the latter – entertaining –, can I find new meanings within old strategies and practices, which approached all the described layers as a whole? This is not a question of authenticity. But as a dancer I seek to re-enter the *traditions* I have learned in ways, which do not copy alterations to the dance I perceive as unnecessary or even violent, while giving space for explorations. And understanding what is *traditional* about a reinvented form in the first place.

When exploring dance within a listening practice, I sense a resemblance to moments in the forest to dancing the Ashtapadi: skin tingling, breath changing, moving, resting, activating, acknowledging, feeling small and wide, being fluid. When I listen, I give up repetitive ways of directing and controlling my body and movement and negotiate to explore the space with the help of the bells and the sound of movement. This experience expands my understanding of time: set

minutes, set rhythms and sequences morph into a rather fluid understanding of time, where the body is given space to find a relation to what the body is surrounded by, through exploring, activity, resting – b e i n g . To find out what the movement sounds like and what it tells me about space, as well as time versus timing. The perceived expansion of time can be well heard in the Dhrupad and Thumri singing practices: both distinct, but having in common durational, meditative and almost trance-like qualities. As a yearlong admirer of these music practices it would be wrong to deny their influence on my listening and dancing, despite the different contexts they come with.

INTERSECTING MANIFOLD MODES OF LISTENING AS A DECOLONIAL STRATEGY

There are many existing approaches to listening, which are mainly dealt with from the perspective of sound art, meditation and healing practices. And in this last section of the writing I share selected voices of practitioners and researchers, who attend to the same and similar topics and respond to them through my own writing voice. The artist Salomé Voegelin writes in her book dedicated entirely to listening:

Seeing always happens in a meta-position, away from the seen, however close. And this distance enables a detachment and objectivity that presents itself as truth. Seeing is believing. The visual ‘gap’ nourishes the idea of structural certainty and the notion that we can truly understand things, give them names, and define ourselves in relation to those names as stable subjects, as identities. By contrast, hearing is full of doubt: phenomenological doubt of the listener about the heard and himself hearing it. Hearing does not offer a meta-position; there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard.

However far its source, the sound sits in my ear. I cannot hear it if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself. Consequently, a philosophy of sound art must have at its core the principle of sharing time and space with the object or event under consideration. (Voegelin, 2010, p. XII)

As a dancer, listening to me is a practice for the sake of the practice itself: experiencing different qualities of sounds and body and their relation in effect and affect. I am interested in how sounds involve me as a listener, move me emotionally, but also physically. And further understanding the body and dance as the sound source within this practice, while engaging with the sound itself as its own entity as a result of movement. It is an interest in abstraction, where I leave out narration, in order to stay present with the sounds and refrain from attaching meaning and hence judgment on them, which is where a deeper experience of sound and hence its source, usually ends. I leave it up to an exploration to navigate through an open interplay of movement creating sound and sound bouncing back to the ear: the sound stops (at least in a generalized volume perception) when the body is in stillness. This silence, however, I understand as part of the movement and soundscape that explores perception of time and space as well as contractions and expansions of sounds. Perhaps this can be imagined similar to moments between inhales and exhales or the contractions of muscles. However, as abstract as this mode of listening is, it also is a response to a gaze *othering* from an orientalist point of view. A dance that proposes listening hence asks the listener to challenge their gaze and be present in an audio-sensorial situation.

As Voegelin writes:

Listening, in this sense, is an aesthetic activity that challenges the philosophical tradition of the West, which, according to film the-

orist Christian Metz, is based on a hierarchy between the senses which positions sound in the attributive location, sublimated to the visual and its linguistic structure. In that position sound is left to describe and enhance but never to do and become. (Voegelin, 2010, p. 13)

Similar to this position of sound, dance practitioners not coming from a Western lineage of art are continuously denied entry to ontologies of *doing* and *becoming*: we are left to represent, justify and describe to either sceptics of *traditions* or to curatorial concepts of empowering an *othered* body with sometimes genuine, but often pretentious charitable grandiosity, seeking to satisfy a fetishizing eye within the markets of art. Both situations – are gut wrenching. With the burden of a colonial past, which in this case led to the abolishment of local dance practices, to the reinvention of them as constructed traditions, used for false propagation of an ancient past, class and cast divides for performers, our positions as dancers today remain complicated. The reinvented *tradition* is both problematic and eminent in the attempt of repair for the idea of a postcolonial nation. It is its' exclusiveness and disregard for the rightful lineage of the temple dancers, that remains disturbing. The term *tradition* (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983) is of course loaded, but too complex to be abandoned with simple one-sided argumentation and the same applies to *ritual* as a term and idea. It is not a secret anymore, that Bharatanatyam is a reinvented form and the label of *tradition* a strategic marker⁶. In theory it is perhaps easy to take one position, but as a practitioner this is a much more complicated reality, as we do not only deal with theoretical terms, but with practices. The term *classical* attached to the dance is even more problematic, as it copies ideologies and aesthetics of Western classical art: all that, which modern and contemporary dance movements oppose, was imposed and at the same time strategically glorified from within. As a practitioner today, who seeks to critically reflect through practice and cannot rely on theory alone, it

has been and most likely will continue to be a challenging journey to withstand unreflected and uninformed interventions and demands to explain more than being encouraged to deepen a practice, that seeks to find genuine decolonial strategies, rather than to either carry on a recent lineage of conceited classicism, or simply move to the obliviousness of Western contemporary dance and its equally constructed idea of *progressiveness* (Bhambra, 2007), which is likely more than partially based on non-Western ideas and philosophies. I do not share the same fear of form and old teachings towards a never-ending search for originality. Chaos, color, improvisation, drone, durational and meditative qualities, to name a few, are not new to many artistic practices labeled as *classical* and *traditional* in many regions of South Asia today – in dance and music. But both ideologies – *classical/traditional* – have deeply changed exactly those qualities. However, remaining in a constructed category of *tradition* as a result of a past as described, is an equally discontented experience. With consideration of the history and strategic usage of the categorization of *traditional*, *classical* and *contemporary* as conflicting and hierarchical, I stand critical towards all of them as terminologies. In view of these constructed boundaries, I seek to explore possibilities of working with the material openly, but mindfully. I resonate with the words of dancer and choreographer Chandralekha:

I have increasingly been disturbed by current Western critical opinion which so effortlessly glamorizes and valorizes Eastern ‘traditions’ in an uncritical manner entirely from an orientalist’ and patronizing perspective. For us, in our Eastern contexts, both our ‘traditionality’ and our ‘modernity’ are complex and problematic areas which are not abstract theoretical categories but real every day concerns – both of life and of performing arts. (Chandralekha 2010, p. 378)

The same applies to diasporic contexts and perhaps becomes even

more complicated, as in my experience an unreflected critique on authenticity on the location of voice continues to censor diasporic communities. In my case, the shared Dravidian, Tamizh culture of Tamizh Nadu and the island of Sri Lanka, where my mother would fall in love with Bharatanatyam and like other comrades would bring it passed the forts of Europe to Germany, seeking new hope, which got lost to a war in her homeland. With all this in mind – both in cognitive and physical memory – this listening practice is an act of resistance in a world where the constant drone of the ongoing colonial project of capitalism/progressive modernity drowns voices and narratives of people and countless species in a never-ending machinery, where the body is fully mechanized in order to be part of it: to quiet down and listen with depth and care to subtleties, silences and noises alike and dance, is empowering to me, with or without putting a narration or a loud political statement on top. It proposes to be a soft resistance within a harsh world. And when I write of silence I make a difference between a sonic silence within an artistic practice, to staying silent in unjust situations.

The construct of national umbrella languages, inconsiderate of the many local differences of the use and function of the word, is in itself violent. By forcing people to adopt the languages of the colonizer and ideologies they come with (*objective, scientific, rational, heteronormative*), they play a major role in the erasure of various local epistemologies. Here I propose listening, even before language enters, as a decolonial strategy applying it to various modes of listening. Using this practice to spend time with organisms and living beings, listening to mountains, winds, waters, plants and other beings, can be used as an approach to unlearn anthropocentric points of views.

Knowledge of the colonized world, and its increasingly transformed nature, was intrinsic to colonial domination (Pratt, 1992; Drayton, 2000). (...) The ‘Orientalist’ discourses of colo-

nialism (Said, 1978; Moore-Gilbert, 1997) took as their subjects both people and nature. Indeed, the two were commonly linked in loosely theorized (and deeply racist) discourses that dismissed as unordered, undisciplined, worthless and uncivilized the ‘wildness’ of exotic and remote peoples and landscapes. For indigenous peoples, colonialism reached ‘into our heads’ (Smith, 1999), and it did the same (with very different implications) for the colonizer: colonization changed the very categories within which nature and society were conceived. (William M Adams and Martin Mulligan, 2003, p. 4)

To engage with the *environment* through modes of listening requires an openness towards what is being listened to in flexible and humble ways and proposes to assist in rethinking the notions of *human* and *nature* as separate and the latter being subordinated to the first. Even if it does not offer practical solutions necessary to act against the environmental crises, it intends to contribute to the conversations around the issues through an embodied philosophy as part of this listening practice, not only through cognitive, but kinaesthetic learning. It can be as simple as taking a walk in a forest or by the sea, taking a deep breath and feeling transformed, even healed. I perceive this as a dialogue between various beings: rather through words, through breathing, being together, listening. Incorporating this into my dance practice certainly informs the dance by stimulating somatic awareness, mindful sensing and decision-making, as well as physical fluidity. And I further link this with fluidity in gender: not necessarily as an explicit gender category as often described in more Eurocentric queer discourses. There are many subtle hints in mythology, but also clear evidence in various texts and it is important to note that my writing is not a modern queering of texts but a re-entering of abandoned ones under colonial rule. Many precolonial societies and groups of people have embraced queer existences not only in myths, but through their own terminolo-

gies and even legal protections. The Kamashastra, the book of love and desire (written between 3rd and 1st centuries BCE), refers to people of third nature, as *tritya-prakriti* and it is stated in the Arthashastra, an Indian treatise on politics, economics, the function of the state and social organization (written between 3rd century BCE and 2nd century CE), that nobody can insult or do an act of cruelty against them, for which a specified punishment under law existed. With the use of religion as part of the colonial project, the notion of queer identities was strategically labeled as *unnatural*. And so decolonizing relationships of *natural* and *unnatural*, whether plant bodies or queer bodies, by reclaiming and rereading passed on knowledge is essential to the fluid listening explorations within my body practice. In her writing the scholar Ruth Vanita wonderfully makes sense of how she uses mythologies to reclaim queer, as well as interspecies inclusions within precolonial agreements of sharing an ecosystem and life on this planet:

The single most remarkable feature of medieval stories of the deities is their multiplicity and variability. Almost any variation that can be imagined exists somewhere. Capable of taking on any form, the divine is made available in multiple ways (...) as infinitely flexible and available – as male, female, neuter; as animal, bird, tree, jewel, river; as present in all elements and all forms of life. The Puranic gods are not just celebrated as omnipresent in a philosophical sense; the stories of their doings represent them as taking on all forms, incarnating as different types of creatures (for instance, Vishnu is incarnated as a boar and a fish) including humans of different ages, castes and genders. The absence of any clearcut philosophical boundary between gods and humans, or indeed gods and other living beings, allows for the deifying of all actions and every way of life. (Vanita, 2000, p. 58 – 59)

And lastly, I experience the tremendous healing effects of listening on the body, as various listening practices propose. Here, it is necessary to point out again the issue of the Euro-Americentric lineage of art. When writing about a practice that can be clearly linked to sound art, the first people one might think of are John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, who undoubtedly are important figures in their contexts. But it is necessary to give balance to an imbalance and misconceptions of a narrative dominated by Euro-America continuously announcing itself as the pioneers of innovation, progressive and contemporary ideas. Hence it is important to clarify that their work has not been influential to mine. It is no surprise to get to know, that Oliveros, who coined the term *Deep Listening*, was influenced by Native American ritual, meditation and music practices, and Cage by the work of Sri Lankan philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy and the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who taught him of the depiction of eight emotions in the concept of *rasa* aesthetics, as well as Zen Buddhism, having profound influence on his approach to music. Due to my interest in sound and performance I am often asked how Cage's work influenced my listening practice, rather than for example Chandralekha or even the idea of *rasa*. And I want to answer this here explicitly: not at all. I draw from the idea of *rasa*, trees in forests, waters, the idea of morning and evening *ragas*, diasporic bubbles, the people I am referencing, as well as wonderful colleagues, Krishna and other hybrids, Thumri songs rupturing my heart, Druphad vocal drones and a life-long engagement with dance and music. And so I am particularly excited to have come across Nada Yoga, which links body and sound in one practice. The precision already of the description from a practice that thinks about sound from the body and not from an external instrument, of course fascinates me, as this is also what my work reflects about. And probably not as deep as this yogic practice already does.

Nada Yoga is about sounds. It is the knowledge of the quality of sounds and the way they affect people. The word Nada comes from the Sanskrit root, Nad. Nad means to flow. The etymological meaning of Nada is a process or a stream of consciousness. Generally, the word Nada means sound. In Tantra, it is thought that sound occurs in four dimensions – four levels of sound relating to frequency, degree of fineness and strength. 1. The coarse (ordinary audible, material) sound, 2. the mental sound, 3. the visualised sound and 4. the transcendent sound. According to Nada Yogis and scriptures dealing with Nada Yoga, the original and transcendent sound is the seed from which the whole of creation has grown. The Nada Yogi experiences the macro cosmic universe as a projection of sound vibrations; the whole world as having developed from sound alone. (Janakananda, 2009 / 2016)

I do recall how the beginnings of this listening practice quickly synchronized with my Yoga routines, not in a matter of simultaneity but frequency. Listening after aligning, specific and conscious breathing, activating, stretching, sweating, meditating and resting undoubtedly enhances and deepens my hearing experience. I have neither experienced nor learned a Nada Yoga practice. But in the spirit of both – exploring practices deepening listening as a bodily experience, as well as decolonizing a Euro-Americentric lineage of progressive (here sound) art, I can't wait to find my way towards this Nada Yoga practice in the future.

The different modes of listening inform each other on essential levels: diving into different modes of listening to sounds, stories and dances is a process of learning and reflecting, being present, responding, exploring, embodying and giving visibility to them in a process of rethinking a methodology of making visible: rather than proposing a voyeuristic experience, a situation of sound involving the

listener and asking them to engage, be present and reflect on the way they digest the heard – here a dance. For me this is an ongoing process of wondering, listening, imagining, dancing, asking, repositioning, renegotiating, exploring, clarifying, unpacking, insisting, trying out and letting go.

NOTES

1. The term *India* is a “historical construct of relatively recent origin” (Vanita, 2000, XV) and compresses a tremendously wide geographical area with an enormous variety of languages, practices and groups under one national umbrella and it remains a challenge to use one word which simplifies this complexity. However, for reader friendly purposes I will use it in consideration of the content and frame of this text.
2. The invention of the terms *tradition* and *progress* as terms themselves are largely responsible for this dichotomy. This is a critique scholars fortunately have attended to for several decades already. There is a complex back and forth of well-formulated arguments and equally exclusions in this debate, such as indigenous practices.
3. *Mudra* means to seal, mark or gesture in Sanskrit and are hand gestures used in many Indian dances used for both abstract dance and story telling. Yogic and tantric practices also include mudras to intensify the effects of yoga or meditation, enhancing the flow of energy. Today’s use of mudras in dance, yogic and practices are not linked and a comparison requires a study of its own.
4. The *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit text on performing arts, explains *abhinaya* as *abhi* – towards, and *naya* – to carry: to carry the spectator towards the meaning.
5. “Rasa is an Indian concept of aesthetic flavour and an essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art that can only be suggested, not described. It is a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffuses the surrounding world of embodied forms.” (Britannica)
6. The research and writings of Daves Soneji bring a lot of light to this complex history of Bharatanatyam, which are not the focus of this writing, but nevertheless a matter I continue to deal with from within my practice.

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Image on page 26: print by Sigurður Atli Sigurðsson.

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Fig. 1. Conrado Espitia, Sebastián. 2017. Retrieved from “Las Huellas del Cerrejón”.

The Land of Thunder and Lightning – Energy and Colonial Footprint

DANIELA MEDINA POCH

Territory is life itself and life is not to be sold, it is to be loved and defended. Territory is the place to dream our future with dignity!

— Francia Márquez, environmental activist¹

How are Germany and the Wayuu community in Northern South America interdependent? What is the Source of our everyday Resources, and in what ways is acknowledgment of these Sources an essential step in stopping the vertical relationship of exploitation be-

tween territories and communities? If colonization imposed a singular worldview, then listening could be a way to unveil a plurality of voices.

*

The association of noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination, argues R. Murray Schafer in his book *The Soundscape, our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. “In earlier times, all natural events were explained as miracles.”² Loud noises, such as the sound of thunder, evoked fear and respect back to the earliest times, seeming to be the expression of divine power. In the Modern era and beyond this fear and respect was transferred from natural sounds (thunder, volcano, storm) to the sounds created by industrial machinery, signifying a power shift. In a similar way, it can be argued that colonialism was the imposition of a monotonal and singular vocal structure which silenced the diversity of voices previously there. As Schafer mentions, “Linguistic accuracy is not merely a matter of lexicography. We perceive only what we can name. In a man-dominated world, when the name of a thing dies, it is dismissed from society, and its very existence may be imperiled.”

Every living being exists because all other living beings exist. Through euphonies and cacophonies of complex interconnections, life reverberates and echoes throughout the planet. There are connections that are more visible and easily imagined than others. The Amazon Rainforest may be so diverse because it nourishes itself from sand that travels on the wind from the Sahara Desert across the Atlantic Ocean. At the same time, the northernmost peak of South America is affected by Germany’s energy consumption – why is that?

A possible starting point to answer this question might be by tracing Resources back to their Sources. A Source is where components originate; it is usually active, and its existence is often entangled within

a complex environmental network. On the contrary, a Resource is understood as a means – an asset that functions efficiently. Resources are often extracted and manipulated and obey market regulation. The difference between a Source and a Resource lies in human intervention – humans transform Sources into Resources, adapting them to the demand of the market. Resources are therefore often understood in numbers. Through the transformation and numeric abstraction of Resources we often forget the Sources they spring from, and the workflow that lies behind them.

In a similar process of abstraction, in the neoliberal world we live in, the infrastructures and technologies that surround us have become deeply adopted by and adapted to our lifestyles, to the point of appearing ubiquitous – in effect, a background noise we have learned to ignore. From within these frameworks, we are unable to distinguish the apparatus that lies behind them, not only on a technical level but also in regard to the models they pursue and sustain. An equivalent on a smaller scale might be the energy that is powering this computer right now.

Where does our electricity come from?

The three major categories of energy for electricity generation are fossil fuels (coal, natural gas, and petroleum), nuclear energy, and renewable energy Sources. Most electricity is generated with steam turbines using fossil fuels, nuclear, biomass, geothermal, and solar thermal energy.³

A TERRITORY FULL OF AURAL CONTRASTS

In the northern part of the South American continent lies the Guajira Peninsula, an extensive desert right on the Caribbean coast which is home to the largest aboriginal community in both Colombia and

Venezuela. Originally a nomadic tribe, having migrated 3,000 years ago from the Amazon Rainforest and Antilles to the desert, the Wayúu and Afrowayúu have since preserved this territory as a communitary space.

La Guajira is filled with aural contrasts: In the background, the wind as a means of circulation, flowing with diverse speeds and intensities, roaring stereophonically across the territory. The wind shapes the paths of the sand and sculpts the sand dunes that give texture to the landscape. There are some places where the wind does not fluctuate, and that quietness and stillness corresponds with a funeral ritual, a celebration of life and death in the Wayúu community, at Cabo de la Vela. Along the coast, next to the infinite kilometers of sand and wind, almost as a surprise, a mass of salty water appears, caressing the coast. Waves rock incessantly, receding, absorbing, and exploding repeatedly – always different, but at the same time constant, mini cyclical explosions, which despite their impotence generate tranquility by repetition, or at least the illusion of repetition.

Throughout the desert, there are Wayúu and Afrowayúu settlements or *rancherías* built from Trupillo tree and Yotojoro, the heart of a dried cactus.⁴ Inside these *rancherías*, a hammock or *chinchorro* always hangs. Goats bleat, while women of the community weave colorful *mochilas* (saddlebags) and dresses – the needle traversing colorful threads, knotting, pulling, accompanied by some chit-chat. I wonder if those colors are a way to dialogue with the dry desert.

During their daily work, shepherds from these communities use aerophone instruments, in which the air vibrates mainly inside a tube. *Sawawa*, *Wootoroi*, *Maasi*, *Wa'wai*, *Kasha*, *Tropa* are all blown instruments, blown in reciprocal dialogue with the wind. Such instruments are used to lead the animals, while also serving as a means of sound expression for the shepherd.⁵ The language of the Wayúu is Wayuunaiki.⁶ The consonants are long, and the accent generally falls on the second syllable of the word. In rituals or celebrations – mark-

ing the first menstrual cycle of a Wayúu woman, for example – when a request for a dream or the healing of some disease is made, the *Kasha* – a bi-membranophone percussion instrument – is played. A type of drum made of pine or ceiba with a twisted goat hide at its ends, the instrument also leads the *Yonna Kasha* dance, two members of the community chasing each other, while extending their colorful dresses to the windy desert.

Nearby, one can hear the struggling engines of jeeps, with their considerable tires and traction, come from urban centers to the desert. From within these vehicles one can hear *vallenato* music ringing through the stereos – rhythms and melodies from the urban region of la Guajira that involve the accordion, the *guacharaca*, the *maracas* and the box. In fact, some say that it was German settlers who, in the mid 19TH century, brought the accordion to the municipality of Riohacha.⁷ The *vallenata* box was an afro-colombian addition that, along with the *guacharaca* – an instrument from the aboriginal communities, gives *vallenato* its particular sound.

Colonial division of territories affected the Wayúu and Afrowayúu communities, because they came to belong to two nation states: Colombia and Venezuela. While some borders have been shut down, despite geopolitical divisions, the communities strive for the preservation of this territory as a borderless living being with its own memory.

The Wayúu and Afrowayúu understand themselves as a tribe of about 56 families. The grandmother is the leader of the community – the *Piaachi* – and the person in charge of healing. The grandmother of the community is a self-taught healer who has dreamed of her role and the way to carry it out. She has a special channel of communication through which she can express what the territory needs and its goals.

According to the Wayúu worldview, the world was created by a romance between the Rain and the Earth; to make the Earth happy,

the Rain chanted, and as it yodeled, Thunder and Lightning roared and released energy that allowed life to emerge: first the flora, then the fauna, and finally, humans.⁸

Despite this myth, since 2010 there has been no more energy-producing thunder or lightning, nor have there been raindrops chanting, as a result of which, in 2014 the territory was declared a region in crisis. “The *Macuira*, our territory, is not good for walking anymore, nor for growing crops or nourishing our animals. We are all thirsty and slowly malnourished. We are burning,” the *Piaachi* said in a recent interview.⁹

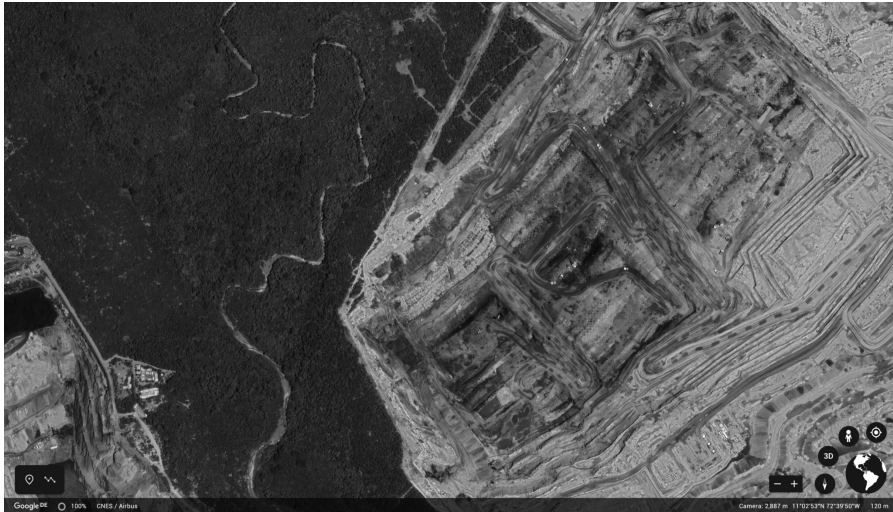


Fig. 2. Retrieved from Google Satellite Image.

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MACHINERY REVERBERATIONS – A CACOPHONY OF MINERALS

In the midst of these conditions, Cerrejón, one of the largest open coal mines in the world, was founded.

The landscape changes from a palette of light orange, blue and green, to a vast, concave surface – a human valley of grey and black patches, in combination with heavy machinery. Backhoes carve the earth. Machinery reverberates, digging and extracting. A cacophony of minerals: industrial metal – a transformed mineral – and crashing and crumbling layers of earth in search of coal, an untransformed mineral. The operation is so big that no human noises surpass the acoustic presence and dominance of machinery. Huge wheels dig into the ground, crushing anything small. The sound of extraction is like that of something being forced out and, through this removal, immediately becoming something else. These incessant vibrations have dominated the landscape from 1976 until the present day.

Cerrejón was both a promise of employment and “development” and a tool to bring attention to the zone. Nevertheless, it has turned out to be one of the main sources of problems for both the region and the community. Being mostly owned by foreign companies (BHP, Anglo American and Glencore), 98% of what Cerrejón yields is exported with only 10% of total sales remaining as profit for the state.¹⁰ On top of that, due to the centralized system of royalties as well as regional mismanagement, the community rarely receives any profit.

Beyond a disproportionate economic relationship, Cerrejón has had severe implications for the local Wayúu communities, depriving them of basic necessities and prioritizing the project’s economic ambitions over the life of the community. Cerrejón has caused numerous cases of involuntary resettlement, affecting the community’s traditional lifestyle and subjecting them to conditions imposed by the management company. Moreover, deep excavation and mining

has caused severely unhealthy air pollution; due to inadequate consultation processes, the air is full of particles of coal which have already affected the health of newborn babies and also disrupted the balance of the aquifers across the whole zone. “Among the evidence submitted to the UN are photos of skin diseases and evidence of respiratory conditions in Wayúu children,”¹¹ says a recent note published by the *London Telegraph*. On top of that, official sources affirm the mine has financed illegal military groups during civil conflicts. “During this country-wide conflict the communities in the mining regions Cesar and in La Guajira suffered greatly. The role of mining companies during this period is subject to controversial allegations related to displacement and collaboration with paramilitary.”¹²

The existence of an open coal mine in the desert is highly paradoxical and problematic: open coal mines require double the amount of water that closed coal mines do. Due to this structural conundrum, Cerrejón has privatized the Rancheria River, the main water Source in the desert. Furthermore, it has purposely dried out several of the streams that divert from the riverbed in order to extract coal from beneath them. In 2019 and 2020, after alerts from the community and deeper research carried out by the Universidad Nacional and United Nations, the Constitutional Court twice sued the company for causing life-threatening pollution and human rights violations. Today, Cerrejón is still operating, with a license to extract coal until 2034.

WHEN WILL WATER BE MORE VALUABLE THAN COAL?

To ask when water will have a higher value than coal is to ask when our collective survival will have a higher value than the accumulation of profit by a few. “While Wayúu children don’t have a single drop of drinkable water, Cerrejón spends 17,000,000 L of water daily to extract

coal, an economic activity which disproportionately benefits multinationals. With the 4700 members of the community whose life has perished due to the unbearable conditions, it seems as if the state is allowing an indigenous genocide. Is the life of these children less valuable than a gram of coal from these multinationals?”¹³ *Telesur* asked in a report three years ago.

Despite efforts to penalize multinationals and compensate the affected communities, the mechanisms of compensation fail to acknowledge the complexity of the effects and consequences over a longer time-frame – not only environmental, but social, cultural and symbolic. As Arturo Escobar says, “the process of deterritorialization not only includes the dispossession of a population, but also the process of removing the territory from the population – the population is transformed.”¹⁴ Are there economic measures that account for this involuntary transformation?

What keeps Cerrejón in existence is the fact that, even with the penalties, their business is still highly profitable, which underlines the disproportionate value given to commercial interests. How to quantify the cultural and symbolic value of a river to an aboriginal community? Such values are hard to quantify, and most of the time they are not even recognized. But what if we were to devise a real accountability that includes social, cultural and environmental effects in both the immediate and the longer term? As Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez suggests, “By exploiting their natural Resources, and hence by durably damaging their environment, industrialized countries owe a huge debt to countries of the South. This ecological debt is much bigger than the financial debt the South supposedly owes the North. Taking it into account would completely transform the way we think about the global economy.”¹⁵

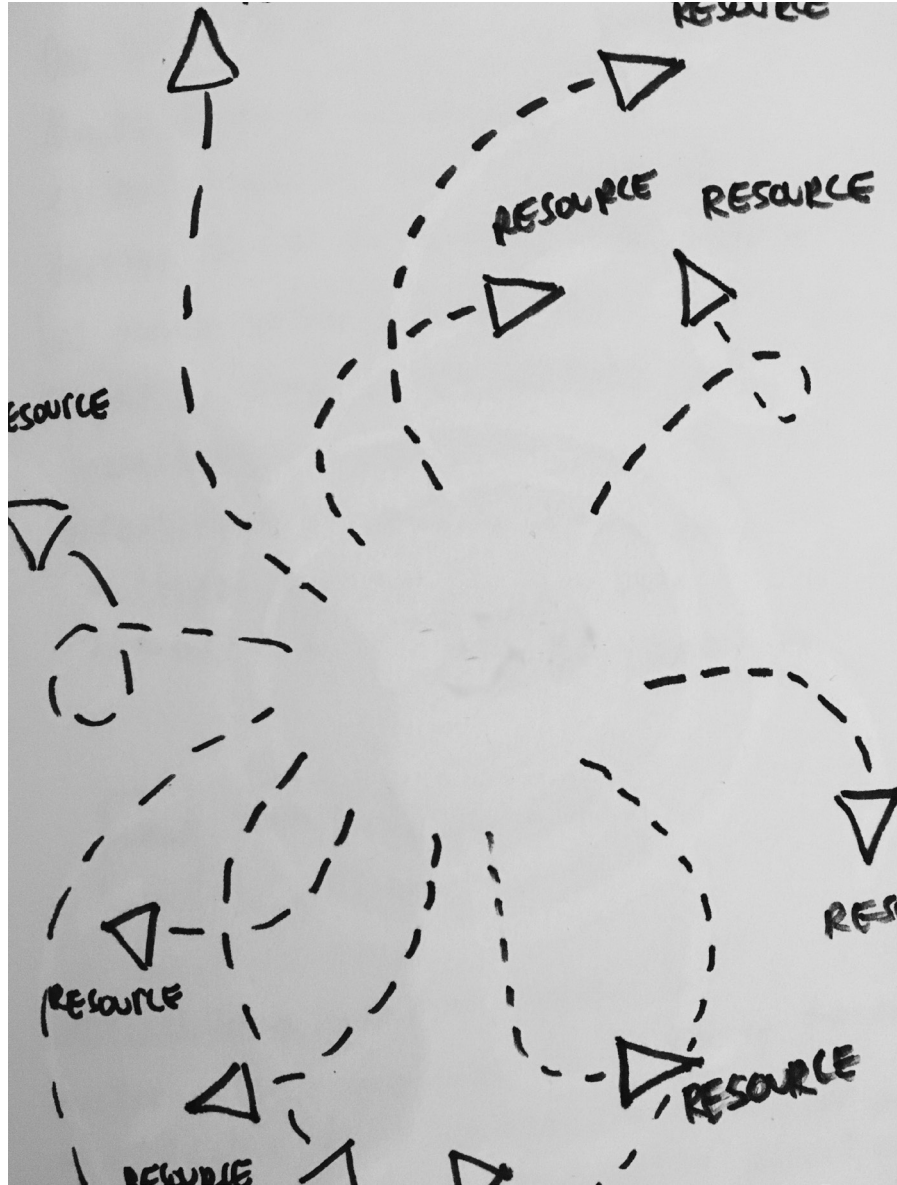


Fig 3. Medina Poch, Daniela. 2020. Sources and Resources.

Between Berlin’s abundant Spree river and Köpenicker Straße stands the Heizkraftwerk, a combined heat and power plant in the Mitte district. Despite the fact that energy company Vattenfall’s Heizkraftwerk is visually so imposing – an industrial castle with two large chimneys and red lights that dominates the landscape of the Spree, its aural presence is barely perceptible. This absence of sound from such a large facility brings to mind an industrial deafness and the invisible trail that runs from Sources to commodities. The industrial processing of energy remains concealed within the headquarters of the factory, but what is commonly heard instead of industrial noises is the vibrations of the energy the plant produces, in the form of electronic music floating from nearby venues Kraftwerk and Tresor. Electronic music is one of the first outcomes we can reclaim from such energy conversion.

The power plant belongs to the Swedish energy group Vattenfall Europe Wärme, which belongs to a German sub-group, responsible for the operation of the plant. Vattenfall is the electric utility for the German states of Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Berlin, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony. The sixth largest consumer of energy in the world, Germany imports more than half of its energy. Nonetheless, the country claims it is on its way towards being “the world’s first major renewable energy economy”¹⁶ and has a reputation for low carbon emissions. These details notwithstanding, Vattenfall has taken the commercial decision to do business in Colombia. “Colombian coal is attractive for Vattenfall both from a commercial and technical perspective and enables us to maintain a diversified sourcing portfolio”¹⁷ states the company on its official website, establishing its position towards the situation at Cerrejón. The official Cerrejón website affirms that “We generate social, environmental, economic and individual value for the Guajira region and Colombia.”

In the land where thunder and lightning created life, there is not even water anymore. All this energy is now in the Global North.

Reviewing the national environmental indexes which makes countries such as Germany, Norway or Canada so proud, in relation to the Resources they import and the containers of waste they export, suggests that these indexes are part of a neocolonial strategy of the distortion of ethics. What is the use of green certificates if they only include the domestic activities and ignore the respective importation of resources and exportation of waste? Green certificates should not be a national award, but should include a real account of the quality of energy produced and consumed on a planetary scale.

WHEN WILL WE STOP PRETENDING THE PLANET IS NOT OUR COMMON TERRITORY?

When will we overcome the fiction of value determined by the market, in which a barrel of oil reached negative values in April of this year¹⁸ but its extraction affected the ground, water, air, flora and fauna of its Source? When will we understand that we need each other for our planetary survival, and that environmental sustainability cannot happen at the expense of the lives of others? If Western concerns about climate change don't go hand in hand with a deep process of decolonialization, it's a one-sided struggle, incomplete and probably ineffective.

*We have modern problems for which there are
no modern solutions.*

— Boaventura de Sousa Santos¹⁹

Not until we embrace a borderless notion of territory which takes into account the specifics of local communities and also embraces in-

terrelation can we attempt to really transform the notion of nature as solely a resource to extract, a direction aligned with the probability of human extinction. Borderless planetary awareness is not universalist, nor does it intend to standardize or reduce the complexities of communities. Instead, it puts in place horizontal exchange dynamics based on such particularities. Borderless planetary awareness acknowledges that making the Guajira a place that cannot support life and losing the Wayúu community as a consequence, like other communities devastated by resource extraction, is not only a national failure, but a planetary failure.

Tracing Resources to their Sources acknowledges the living beings that are part of our planetary equilibrium. Tracing Resources to their Sources can contribute to a planetary society which is not based on production and consumption – a society in which we humans are also seen not as mere Resources, or a work force, but as Sources in our own right. If Resources have value as transformed Sources, let us claim back the value of Sources.

For some aboriginal communities, underground minerals such as coal, oil and gold resonate as Sources themselves – ritual Sources which, through their existence in specific places underneath the ground, trigger processes of rooting and consequent care for the territory.²⁰ Sources to be worshiped.

If colonization was an imposition of a homogenizing voice, and a consequent silencing of the rest, decolonization must be centered on listening. Only through deep listening can we begin to perceive the contingent composition of sounds and allow other worldviews to emerge. Perhaps it is time to listen – listen to Sources.

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IMAGES

Fig. 1. Conrado Espitia, Sebastián. 2017. Retrieved from "Las Huellas del Cerrejón". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryssy7pJhJI>

Fig. 2. Retrieved from Google Satellite Image. Copyright 2020 CNES / Airbus, Maxar Technologies, Map data @2020 <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Cerrejon,+Barrancas,+La+Guajira,+Colombia/@11.0327963,-72.652702,438m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m8!1m2!2m1!1scerrejon!3m4!1sox8e8ba638256a7e41:ox841b5c2916dd2914!8m2!3d11.0382555!4d-72.6525879>

Fig. 3. Medina Poch, Daniela. 2020. Sources and Resources.

the here and now of listening

CARLA J. MAIER

How do we take notice, interact and make sense through listening and sounding? While sound walking with MC and beatmaker Manmeet Kaur through different localities in Berlin between March and November 2020 during lockdown, a multitude of noises and voices became amplified, sonic regimes became noticeable, and we were provoked to listen otherwise and encouraged to imagine alternative practices and response-abilities.

This text follows some of the practices and elaborations that went into the production of the first episode of the Podcast *modes of listening and sound practices*, which I am developing in collabora-

tion with music and sound platform *norient*. The first episode with the title “reasoning with inner-city rhythms” was co-produced with Manmeet Kaur, and it started from a shared interest in attuning to the city’s distinct and situative sounds, in performing with as well as recording and editing these sounds, and to explore how this makes us engage with current social issues and historical entanglements through listening.

We explored how interacting with the city’s materialities and architectures – using our senses, but also field recorders and contact microphones – amplifies its sonic textures and sparks sonic thinking. A sonic thinking that was extended into the editing process of the final audio work. We decided to structure the episode along three “localities”¹ which resemble the three sub sections of this article. The episode itself can be listened to under: <https://norient.com/carla-j-maier/reasoning-rhythms>.

The following text does not reflect what is actually heard in the episode, but it rather follows some of the sonic and narrative threads spun in the audio work and entails some further reflections, perspectives, and questions.

CONCAVITY OF SOUNDS

During one of the sound walks, the encountered steel sculpture² that sits in front of the Berghain building became part of a resonating assemblage as we sounded its concavity by gently applying a contact microphone and activating it with a small wooden stick; its hollow structure resonated in dialogue with the environment while conjuring up social, temporal, and technological dimensions (Born, 2005). The dialogue continued when Kaur and I had conversations some months later when we were in the middle of the editing process:

Kaur: The city with its own kinds of rhythms and amplitudes caught our attention and it became the grounds of getting to know each other more through listening. A kind of organic introduction ... we were triggered by a lot of similar sounds, and this resulted in an assurance, a common interest to engage in this project / Maier: Yeah, we started from an interest in the materiality of sound, and in listening as an activity that engages our own bodies as part of an assemblage of sounds, materials, and objects. As with the sculpture we found in front of the Berghain building, it became a resonator for new possibilities, and socialities, while also pressing against the emptiness of this techno club – and so many other culture venues throughout the city – in pandemic times / Kaur: The contact mic I used amplified the hollow structure of the steel sculpture and revealed the concavity of sounds contained in objects, and an openness of sounds... / Maier: ...and this enacted something organic, life and movement. (Extracts from skype conversation, 12 February, 2021).

The sonic engagement with Berghain also conjured up a possible space, both imagined and real, aspirational and grounding. It was also another, visual and narrative element that influenced how we listened and sonically engaged in this specific locality: MORGEN IST DIE FRAGE (TOMORROW IS THE QUESTION), as a banner³ on top of the Berghain building exclaims, inspired us: “How we want to live together in the future is never a purely futuristic one. It is always a current question” (Kaur/Maier 2021). And it is one that we asked in relation with and through sound. This reminds of Brandon LaBelle’s notion of the *invisible*: “Sound, in this regard, puts bodies and things into motion by extending their reach; a literal *moving away* that, in doing so, shifts our perceptual frame from its material anchoring, its source, toward an evanescent becoming” (LaBelle 2017, 32, emphasis in original). Through performing with the sculpture and the banner, we were able to ask questions relevant for each of us, and thus to get to know each other more. And to move on.

LISTENING IN TRANSIT

Listening in transit, what holds us together, what sets us apart? The second “locality” we engaged with led us through a more buzzing part of the city where normalcy is somehow upheld in spite of the pandemic restrictions. The city is ordered along visual cues, stairs, passages, train tracks, and signs which remind passengers to adhere to social distancing and hygiene measures. The habitual efficiency of the visually-oriented navigation in the urban space demanded a progressive unlearning while we gradually adapted to the overloaded stacks of frequencies and layers of noises we moved with. Our purpose of being close to the soundings while moving around meant shifting registers of perception: Surfaces became more blurred, while individual sounds stuck out, demanded our attention, guided our actions. There was excitement in this, a bit like dancing with the sounds, and with each other, recognizing a different beat. The screeching sound of an electric staircase. The sustained three-tone sound of the closing S-Bahn doors. Random sounds came to inherit a tactility, vibrancy, and urgency. In sound walking I embodied these sonic situations, they become part of my memories. There is no either-or-relationship of listening and sounding, of unlearning and learning to listen. When I passed by the screeching staircase more than three months later, I was struck by the sound, in wonder and surprise of being catapulted into an unexpected state of joy. In the words of Pauline Oliveros, “[a] word, a fragment, or a paragraph can later trigger your memory or your imagination and yield an enormous amount of information” (Oliveros 2005,18). The frequency and repetitive rhythm of the electric staircase propelled me back into a moment of shared listening, resonating in the here and now of listening:

Rhythm returns, it makes a habit of it. This is in its nature – repeating itself, reiterating, doubling-back. [...] There is a

rhetoric to rhythm, we feel it, it carries an affective charge, conveying meaning as feeling and tone, rather than logic or information (Henriques et al. 2014, 4).

Thus, while listening in transit, the encountered sonic rhythms revealed a porosity of reflection and amplified the affective and embodied dimensions of audition.

A FORCE TO MOVE WITH

Rhythm returns during our sound walk, though in a different manner, when confronted with the concrete blocks that constitute the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe.⁴ The 19,000 square metres constituted of 2711 concrete slabs of different heights, the memorial is a controversially discussed site. Listening and moving within this material-discursive assemblage meant navigating individual as well as collective relationalities and dissonances, confronting the limitations of this affective archive.

Attuning to the impenetrable materiality of the concrete stela, listening is dominated by a physically perceptible pressure on the membranes and liquids of my body, which corresponds also with the repetitive beat of the gradually varying arrangement of the concrete blocks and the gaps in between that become audible when walking along them:

Once more, the city's architecture acts like a score.
I have been acting with the score
There is so much agency and
I am one part in this sonic assemblage

Getting affected in the here and now of listening
meant for me that movement was highly restricted
And at the same time there was a force to move with
the visual and sonic pressure of this place,
of this history

Am I chasing, or am I chased
There is no clear answer to this question here
There is no answer ready to be known,
to be owned
(Maier 2020)

Through listening and moving at this site, I became attentive to the potentiality of that “what begins technically as a movement is *immediately* a movement of thought” (Manning 2009, 1, emphasis in original). A movement of thought emanating from a concrete responsiveness through listening that became a reverberating trace in the immediate reflections above, first spoken into a field recorder, in fragmented form, and then later written down. At the same time, this movement of thought led to the gaps and limitations of what becomes knowable at this place. As AM Kanngieser remarks on their practice of listening and becoming attentive, “attunement means to tune into, to listen and to make adjustments to build harmonies or relationships between things ... it is about how we make relations and how we coexist” (Kanngieser 2020).

The listening experience between the concrete blocks that Kaur and myself shared brought us “from the numbness to the issue” (Kaur 2020), from the broken vibration of the unbreakable cement to the violence and loss that finds no equation in any sound, in any history. But this memorial might also withhold many stories that could have been told here, otherwise, about the missing, and of the living. Which reminds me again of Kanngieser's claim that “attunement is

predicated on asking questions. It invites us to encounter unknowns, and more crucially, what is unknowable” (ibid.).

Listening here is not about finding solace. But the weight of the unknowable functions as a reminder that attunement demands listening again. As LaBelle notes, “according to an ethics tuned to the missing, the audibility of speaking out often shifts to that of whispered and occluded reverberations and dark volumes, acousmatic sonorities which demand another form of listening – a strained, horizontal listening by which to collaborate with the unseen” (LaBelle 2018, 32).

This implies an ongoing practice of memorizing, and of asking the question of how we want to live together in the future. *Morgen ist die Frage*.

REASONING

To “be present as a listener in the urban space” (Maier 2020) and to “tap beyond the human ability to hear” (Kaur 2020) became two of the anchors of Kaur and my collaborative work, together with a curiosity in the social, temporal, and technological relationships of listening, of thinking *through* sound, and of creating sonic fictions.

Ultimately, it is the active here and now of listening, and the work of the imagination, which materializes the encountered “urban sonic ecologies” (Groth/Samson 2013), in which the concavity of sounds evokes vacancies as well as possible spaces, in which listening in transit produces embodied affects, and in which sonic and bodily engagements with a memorial reveals the unknowable. This requires a radical openness to one’s own habitual perception as well as to the limitations and questions one encounters in listening, and it remains to be explored how further collaborative connections and critical perspectives can be developed from these listening practices.

NOTES

1. “Locality” is the title of a song by Manmeet Kaur (<https://mcmmanmeetkaur.bandcamp.com/track/locality>), and it emphasizes here the openness, fluidity and the politics of place.
2. Dirk Bell, “Love”, sculpture, shown in the context of exhibition »Studio Berlin« at Berghain, 2020.
3. Rirkrit Tiravanija’s “Morgen ist die Frage” banner, shown in the context of exhibition »Studio Berlin« at Berghain, 2020.
4. The memorial was designed by New York Architect Peter Eisenman and ceremonially opened in 2005.

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Co-listening

BUDHADITYA CHATTOPADHYAY

After their earlier meetings in Copenhagen¹, Berlin², and Den Haag³ over the last few years, artist Budhaditya Chattopadhyay meets researcher Budhaditya Chattopadhyay for the first time outside of Europe, in Kolkata, India. It is a buzzing balcony of an apartment, where Chattopadhyay just finished a 15 days' self-quarantine after a long flight from Amsterdam, and now ready to meet people and go out in the city, still within heavy restrictions of movement. They sit listening to the sounds of the new housing complex, in which the domestic setting is constantly invaded by public sounds, and a sense of community is built. They share a warm cup of ginger-lemon tea that

has been made just now. They both stretch their legs and converse in earnest.

BC (Researcher): What are you listening to at the moment?

BC (Artist): Today I was listening to Max Richter's long-form composition *Sleep*.⁴ Never took his work very seriously, but somehow in this solitude, I like the over 8-hour long remix of *Sleep*. This work provides for me, now, a sense of timelessness and placelessness – as I am still jetlagged and a sense of place is yet not fully formed. I have been traveling between cities, from Amsterdam to Delhi, and then to Kolkata. At this moment, the busy highway just outside the housing complex makes me feel like the movement of life is a movie – as if I am someone outside and only observing, not taking part in it. I discovered this work inside the airplane in the audio section of flight entertainment; and listening to it helped me to close my eyes after a tenacious transit with medical tests, waiting in queues, immigration checks. I am, however, curious to understand why such musically gentrified work awash with pleasantly immersive experience engages me. Perhaps I need just some more sleep. But I am also listening to the sounds of everyday objects in the private landscape, such as the refrigerators, fans, toilet flushes, laptop, and a solitary table-lamp – they reverberate evermore to my ears as if sounding their presence as talkative but grounding entourage. They are the immediate and true companions in this continuing and never-ending self-quarantine, social isolation and solitary confinement.

BC (R): Do you think what I listen to and what you listen to differ from each other?

BC (A): Yes, listening as an act is very private, and there are subjective positions taken at each moment when there is a mysterious process

of sensing and cognition unfolding. Jean-Luc Nancy would say, listening suspends between sensing and understanding.⁵ What I understand and what you sense can be different based on our cognitive universes, personalities, sensibilities, and the unique auditory situation of the self. Perhaps a sound will generate a good memory in me, and a trauma in you. There is little of an objective reality – much of what we make sense of upon listening, seeing, or through other sensory modalities, are born out of our inner conditions.

BC (R): Is there no way we can listen together?

BC (A): I often used to share a headphone with my first girlfriend. We used to sit in a park stretching our legs, listening to alternative or Gothic Rock bands, such as The Cure or Anathema. The left earplug in her left ear, and the right earplug in my right ear. We used to share the same music but each getting only the half of the stereo mix. We could listen together, and the underscoring was on this sense of togetherness, not on what we were listening to individually. Perhaps our listening and sense-making were different. But we used to listen holding hands with a spirit of sharing sounds.

BC (R): Beautiful! Do you think as we grow up, our cognitive universes harden to become insular, and we cannot co-listen anymore like the experience you just shared?

BC (A): We do, occasionally. We go to the movies, where we tend to listen in a social situation, together. Often our reactions to different sonic moments are diverging, but one strong sound cue may generate a consensual hush as a communal reaction. This mode of social co-listening helps to build communities, just like in the neighborhood. In some online portals⁶, co-listening is understood as having equal time limits for talking and listening between conversational part-

ners in organisational communication. Co-listening can, however, be expanded from this narrower definition towards a social and community driven listening mode. While equity between and respect for the listening partners are important, the non-judgmental and compassionate approach in co-listening is central, and therefore cannot be restricted within professional instructions. What happens when there is a fertile pause in speaking, thinking, looking out the window, and coming back to the conversation with a new perspective? The immeasurable and ineffable moments in listening are as important as making meaning by following a steady pattern. The focus of co-listening should be on this sense of unpredictability, emergence, and flux in listening together, often without making sense, but with a compassionate engagement even in silence, holding hands without talking, without navigational cues, or orientation signals. Co-listening needs a lot of loving and caring between humans, and non-humans. When a cat answers back in purr after a pat on its head, no meaning-making is necessary.

BC (R): How do you offer a philosophical insight into co-listening? Referring to phenomenology, how do you position your idea within a larger discourse around listening and thinking? Is phenomenology relevant here, or does it “other” audience?

BC (A): Well, as philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara underscores: a propensity to listen to others without making immediate judgments is crucial.⁷ This non-judgmental listening may potentially lead to bridge the troubled water of difference, be it racial, social or political. On a personal level, listening at a certain place and time requires me to be there and learn the historical trajectory of the place and its inhabitants, both human and non-human. Once I listen to this history, I can start engaging with the place. I have problems with approaches where the listener’s position is colonial – it is to extract sounds as

much as possible from the place. On the contrary, I would like to develop an inter-subjective relationship with a place through the medium of sound, via situated listening. Rather than phonography, I prefer active listening, in which this reciprocal and inter-subjective approach to co-listening is central to a psychogeographic exploration of a site as ground for phenomenological engagement, much like a poetic unpacking of a reality. Often, I don't record at all, though I might spend months in a place exploring nooks and crannies of its body, and listen in-depth by making the place respond to my interventions in a shared resonance. This sonic reciprocity and self-attunement is central to co-listening.

BC (R): What do you think constitutes active listening? Is it the same as co-listening?

BC (A): Active listening is going beyond the reduced and causal listening mode to involve the context of the listening and nurturing its contemplative potential. For example, I hear the laptop fan as a sound producing object, but active listening will make me contemplate the auditory associations. As I mentioned earlier, in co-listening this reciprocal and inter-subjective approach to listening is central. It helps in developing a personal cognitive sound world. Co-listening and community art practices, such as my workshop projects⁸, enable interspersing daily life and community art within a social and collective rubric that is interchangeable.

BC (R): How can noise affect the mind? How can it affect listeners on a level deeper than they might usually be aware of? Is noise something you affectively engage with?

BC (A): I don't undermine noise as it is done from the privileged Shaferian soundscape approach. I even don't like the term *noise*; ev-

erything is sound. I rarely get annoyed with so-called "noise" in public and private spaces, because often such a concern is legislatively constructed. I am fascinated by the materiality of noise, its many splendors, many textures and multiple layers. I am not a "noise artist" the way it is defined. I work with listening, and I sensitize the listening faculty to noises that have socio-political connotations. For me noise is a polyphony of sounds – and this polyphony is born out of co-listening with the environment, and the others who inhabit the environment. My motivation, or the drive to work with sound is to develop a kind of inclusive, contemplative relationship with the lived environment. I think noise at a material level is fascinating, and in a philosophical level can engage a number of issues around subjectivity. It is also an artistic strategy – think of the many vociferous, extrovert and expressive noise artists in the Global South – their embracing of noise is political, much like taking a parasitical social position. Michel Serres would love to study the South Asian noise artists in the context of his work *The Parasite*⁹, in which he argues that a parasite uses noise to hide itself. The noise artists' sole instrument to engage the political establishment is harsh noise; it's an anti-establishment stance, an activists' challenge to the status quo. Indeed, their artistic position conceals the individual artist but accumulates a mass activism against colonial models of everyday exploitation and extraction of human resources. If as an artist I don't engage with noise, I fail to take a resistive role.

BC (R): How can one become more aware of the effects that noise has on a sensitive listener on a subconscious level? Is noise a connecting energy between co-listeners?

BC (A): To me, noise is the song of the oppressed. Any sound that is ontologically unrecognizable is generally termed noise; hence it is a construct. On a subconscious level, the ontological ambiguity of noise

rests on a poetic rupture. This is a crack in the body of understanding, and through this crack, sensing may take different poetic forms conducive to self-attunement, instead of the Western colonial mode of othering prevalent in the sonic gentrification of European classical music. The boundaries of noise shape a sense of epistemic presence. As a sound practitioner using noise as a departing point, I contend that it is often difficult to stay away from noise of any kind. Noise is powerful because it is omnipresent. Noise can infiltrate from any side of a tightly closed room and engage viscerally. Noise can buzz around the ear until one tends to recognize it, and interpret a meaning. Noise has its own aesthetics that can mobilize the public sphere. Likewise, noise can be understood as a composite sound, just as the colour black consisting of all the colours in a composite manner. Like the Black Lives Matter movement, which is community driven and inclusive, a *Noise Movement* can be envisaged to connect various segments of societies against injustice. Including noise in the sonic palette is something marginalized artists continue to practice. For them, co-listening with humans and non-humans alike and their noises is crucial. This mode of adaptive perception and self-attunement is found in Indigenous listening and thinking traditions – it’s a step to contribute to a community. The poetic, contemplative, relational, and emancipatory perspective of co-listening which enables building community, in my opinion, is at the core of Global South artists’ work, or to any artist who feels marginalized in the contemporary societies. Co-listening here is a shared promise of equity and inclusion.

BC (R): That’s perhaps a radical position to take. Can I have more tea? Thanks. I want to know, does media, as a ubiquitous component of our lives, become part of the artistic work you want to communicate to an audience? Does choice of technology affect the manner of “composing” listening experiences? Is mediation a problem? Please tell me how you utilize mediation processes that help conveying your message.

BC (A): After coming from the field of listening, I deposit recordings, if I have any, in my archive for a long time; often I don’t have any recordings. When eventually I come back to these listening traces, they lose the immediate contextual, documentary and emotional associations by this temporal distance. It’s easier to work with them when this disassociation happens. Why are you asking only about my work? There are so many interesting artists working today; their methodologies open up discourses unheard of. Take for example, how artists from South Asia or North Africa like Khaled Kaddal or Isuru Kumarasinghe question the complex link between the sound of politics and the politics of listening. Kaddal uses sounds of police sirens amongst other urban noise elements to expose audiences to an immersive sonic experience associated with the ominous feelings of “alert” and “alarm.” In his work urban noise takes a political position by carrying information and impressions about the city to affectively engage listeners. Artists like Khyam Allami challenge the Eurocentric biases embedded in modern technologies by offering a decolonial application platform. Surabhi Saraf questions the forced immigration and surveillance mechanism in the Western world based on its notorious racial profiling against immigrants and people of colour, and Ish Shehrawat hacks Western musical instruments to produce unconventional sounds. I co-listen with this community of artists in my own work developing a sense of togetherness on the basis of reflecting on the present moment marked by issues of decoloniality, provincializing Europe, migration, social inequality and exclusion. This sense of togetherness allows us to engage in solidarity.

BC (R): Of course, I know their work – but often I see non-European artists don’t appear at the forefront of curatorial activities in Europe where cultural capital has been accumulated since and through the colonial times of plunder and extractive capitalism; though lots of support is available, they are often only for local artists. In the

European fortress, migrating and diaspora artists are often seen as marginalized and obscure. What will be your curatorial strategy if you're asked to curate an exhibitory showcasing of artists inclusive of Global South voices?

BC (A): Contemporary Global South artists continue to be critical and engaged with issues linked to their regions' turbulent and fraught history of colonialism, decolonization, and social division. These conflict-ridden experiences make their work interesting and thought-provoking, I believe. However, in Europe or in the larger Western world, where most of the funded curatorial activities take place, an unfair social divide is upheld in contemporary curation of sound and listening driven arts, as well as in the writing of its history. This divide is practiced often by a lack of critical engagement with artists from South Asia, Middle-East, and Africa – broadly known as the Global South, and through ignoring, under-representation, under-referencing, pigeonholing, or appropriation of the “non-Western” artistic and scholarly perspectives in a globally canonizing body of work in the field. My curatorial goal will be to bridge this gap in my capacity as an artist – creating an equitable environment of reciprocity, confluence, and solidarity. What do you think as a researcher? How do you like to contribute to a re-writing of history that's inclusive?

BC (R): From a scholarly position, I would like to create a fertile entry point into the field of sound practice and listening modes in the Global South to understand the unique sonic sensibility and media aesthetics of these regions. Such new knowledge may fundamentally shift the perspectives in the field of sound studies and within a global media art history with a decolonial approach to re-examining notions of temporality, spatiality and subjectivity. The research may help re-examine a fundamental issue in the studies of modernity and globalization concerned with media cultural encounter and techno-

logical transmissions between Global North and South as a two-way process of postcolonial confluence, not a one-way affair. By putting Global South sound and media artists, practitioners and thinkers on the international platform, their work can be exposed to the wider global audience for a much-needed critical engagement. This already ongoing research project¹⁰ may benefit the large pool of practitioners active in the Global South, particularly the media artists, audiovisual practitioners and artists, whose arts and crafts have often been neglected and ignored in the Eurocentric field of sound curation as well as sound and media art history.

BC (A): If you wish, we can collaborate to advance this artistic research and curatorial project together. We can start with co-listening now on this balcony.

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On Acoustic Justice

BRANDON LABELLE

It is my concern to bring into question the issue of acoustics and the ways in which it can be understood to impact onto expressions of individual and collective agency. While acoustic design is mostly a professional practice contributing to urban planning, and the construction of specific architectures, such as concert halls or recording studios, I focus on understanding acoustics by way of the acts or practices whereby people modify and retune their environments or situations in order to support the movement of particular sounds. In doing so, such enactments contend with a given order of hearing, or what Roshanak Kheshti terms “regimes of aurality” (Kheshti 2015: XIX).

In considering such a perspective, I'm led to pose acoustics as a political question. If we consider acoustics as a range of material and social practices that condition or enable the movement of sound, and often in support of the articulation of particular views or desires, it can be appreciated how it impacts onto experiences of participation and emplacement, defining who or what is heard – whose voice may gain traction within particular places and in what way. In this sense, I highlight acoustics as *the distribution of the heard* extending from Jacques Rancière's political theories, and how “politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2013: 8). As the distribution of the heard, acoustics contributes to what or who one hears, to the ways in which such hearing impacts onto processes of self-orientation, and how orientation gains definition according to the particularities of environments, institutional systems, and ideological leanings.

Following such perspectives, sound is emphasized as a deeply relational medium, one that enables social connection, processes of synchronization and desynchronization, attunement as well as interruption, and that moves across hearing and feeling, listening and touch; from the consonant to the dissonant, the harmonic to the cacophonous, sound provides a compelling framework for probing questions of relational experience as well as social equality.

Acoustics, in this sense, is positioned as a critical framework for engaging a politics of listening and the differing imaginaries and ideologies that work upon listening habits. As Kheshti highlights, regimes of aurality call upon particular ways of listening, establishing or reinforcing certain meanings and understandings of “the ideal listener” and how we take pleasure and support from what we hear. Yet, aurality is never so fixed, as one may equally find unexpected routes, or ways of hearing differently, tracing over or disturbing the acoustic lines placed before us.

What kinds of material, spatial or social arrangements are made to facilitate the movement of a given sound? To support the articulation or reverberation of certain voices and meanings? In what sense does acoustics function to host shared desires, or to hinder their circulation? What acoustic forces or forms exist that enable one's own voice to resound within particular rooms or institutions, and that aid in struggles over recognition? And further, how is one situated within the acoustic economies and histories at play within specific contexts?

In probing such questions, I argue for acoustics as the basis for considering approaches toward social recognition and the making of collective worlds; acoustics as a path for reflecting upon the different forces at work in shaping the movements of people, particularly in struggles over recognition. In this context, acoustic justice is considered on a micropolitical and macropolitical level, from the immediate ways in which questions of access, fairness, and ethical regard play out within street-level encounters, and further, to how acoustics participates on the level of law and governmentality, for instance in the courtroom or the classroom, by contributing to the rules of audibility and the norms that impact on how bodies and voices are made to matter. Acoustic justice moves across issues of architecture and affect, social equality and recognition, and is posed in order to engage how hearing and being heard are vital to a political ecology of mutual concern and civility.

ORIENTATIONS: THE PSYCHOACOUSTIC TO THE SOCIAL ACOUSTIC

Understanding acoustics as a political question is based foremost on recognizing it as both a material and social issue. On one hand, acoustics is understood as the physical conditions, the architectures and spatial arrangements, that facilitate and shape the reflections and

reverberations of sound: acoustics as a question of the physics of sound, the material properties of space, and the physiology of hearing, and how these are applied to strategies of design (Grueneisen 2003; Blesser / Salter 2015).

Following this perspective, acoustics dramatically contributes to a sense of personal orientation as well as social participation, lending to how one navigates through spaces and environments in capturing a sense of place or belonging. This includes appreciating how one synchronizes, attunes, and aligns with others by way of what one hears and feels, and how bodily or affective experiences support forms of participation. From such a material and social base, acoustics is understood to affect experiences of hearing as well as that of sociality, to influence the relationships one may form and within which listening becomes more operative. This leads to considering acoustics as having an impact onto the politics of recognition and location, and subsequent articulations of forms of life: acoustics as a politics through which struggles over recognition and rights, movement and access, belonging and participation are drawn out.

From a street-level perspective, acoustics may be considered less as a professional skill or science, and more through the everyday practices or gestures that work at securing paths of orientation. For instance, the spatial arrangements and social scenes, the vocal articulations and verbal arguments, the technological systems and cultural expressions communities make in support of particular forms of life, come to position acoustics within the arenas of everyday experience.

Such a view may be further unpacked to recognize a series of levels or modes by which acoustics is operative. This includes engaging with the psychoacoustic, and the physiological and neurological experiences or conditions of hearing that greatly inform not only what one is able to hear, but additionally how those experiences nurture a form of auditory cognition and imagination – the psychoacoustic as nonconscious or unconscious ways of experiencing or relating

to sound. Following the psychoacoustic, and the more personal status of hearing, we may consider the social acoustic and the dynamics of life with others; how acoustics, and the circulation of acoustic information, influences all types of social relationships – social acoustics as the exchanges afforded by way of sound and listening within given environments. An acoustic model or framework further integrates the electroacoustic, as the mediations of distributed sound and the technological apparatuses that enable sonic diffusion, that “point” sound in particular directions and around which social identities often gravitate, for instance in musical cultures. Finally, acoustic ecologies of human and more-than-human life allow for greater appreciation of acoustics as a critical ecological framework, which can assist in practices of care and sustainability. Through such an ecological perspective, a notion of the bioacoustic may be put forward to also speak toward the ways in which conceptualizations of *life by way of hearing* become politically operative, for example by the positioning or othering of the Deaf as being “unable” to hear and therefore less-than-human (Bauman 2004; Ladd 2003).

These levels or frameworks are suggestive for elaborating how acoustics can be thought in terms of regimes of aurality, and how the establishment of sonic or acoustic norms become sites of contestation – to contend with the social or bioacoustic framing of what counts as “good” or “acceptable” sound for example, or with the technological constructs that distribute sounds in particular ways to figure listening positionalities. In addition, identifying acoustics across a range of perspectives provides a framework for querying how individuals and communities construct paths of resistance, togetherness, and social consciousness by way of sound and listening. This may be found in a range of instances where people rise up to demonstrate against systems of oppression or injustice. Throughout the uprisings in Beirut starting in October 2019 for example, there appeared a constant reference to “feeling unheard” on the part of ordinary people.

Dubbed “the open-mic revolution” (Battah 2019), the protests and subsequent assemblies organized in Beirut were consistently based upon upsetting a given distribution of the heard (as dominated by the political elite and related media channels), and can be appreciated as an attempt to reorient the acoustic or sonic norms that often define not only what one hears, but equally how such auditory experiences can meaningfully resonate to impact systems of governance.

Rather than a strict concentration on sound, acoustics brings focus to the material, technical, and social conditions that surround and that affect embodied and collective life. In this regard, focusing on acoustics – from sonic imaginaries to electroacoustic mediations – enables a range of inquiries, which have at their center a concern for the ways in which one navigates and negotiates systems and discourses that impact onto defining a sense of place and participation. While expressions of sonic agency find articulation by way of the punctuated sounds one may make, acoustic justice is figured by considering the arrangements and configurations that allow for different types of orientation, from social and political to bodily and communal.

QUEER ACOUSTICS

Following this critical framework, I’m concerned to mobilize acoustics as the basis for contending with a politics of orientation; from the experience of hearing a specific event to the processes by which communities develop specific forms of being together – how some find their way by drawing support from the materialities and affordances of sonic experience, which include communicational, organizational, and affective capacities of acoustic acts, from the silences and noises, rhythms and vibrations that shape and inflect a sense of place and possibility. Acoustics may define a range of processes around which bodily orientation and recuperation, cultural expressivity and nego-

tiation, social navigation and construction are worked at. To listen therefore is not only to hear, but to also attune and detune, balance and rebalance the forms and forces by which one is figured as well as participates in the figuring of others.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed challenges the ways in which traditions of phenomenology may bypass the more socialized, racialized, sexualized and gendered shape and impress of the phenomenal; the objects and things, the architectures and rooms that surround us are never neutral, never only there for us, but rather, are made available through a range of highly situated, historical, and social processes that work to establish the normative shape of what we may associate with and how (Ahmed 2006). For Ahmed, one’s figuring in the world is thus always already defined by a set of dominant constructs that are deeply material and spatial, coded and regulated, and that enable or constrain the particular grasp specific bodies may have onto the world around. One gains entry or not according to the availability of passages and pathways, and how they open for some more than others. In short, bodies are never only just bodies, but are already shaped by social, political, and identity norms, which act to limit the phenomenal availability of things according to the social, racial, sexual and gendered specificity bodies and spaces carry.

The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are “in front” of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. What is available is what might reside as a point on this line. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain, or even become, out of reach. Such exclusions – the constitution of a field of unreachable objects – are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us: we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not “on line”. The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there (Ahmed 2006: 14-15).

Ahmed opens an important view onto how orientation is never freely found, but rather, is shaped by established patterns that bring one into certain alignments, or that make particular misalignments dangerous. One is equally oriented by the world as one makes orientation for oneself. Orientation is performative, whereby one may seek support through the material world while contending with the lack of availability of access or things. One therefore practices orientation, which shifts as bodies shift, as one aligns or misaligns, attunes or disturbs, is welcomed or pushed out. This includes the ways in which some bodies are racialized, positioned by way of a dominant white world that defines how people of color experience a relation to things and spaces, and what it means to be at home in the world. As Ahmed poses: “If the world is made white, then the body at home is one that can inhabit that whiteness” (Ahmed 111). Being at home in the world, feeling as if things and spaces of that world are made available, is deeply influenced by a racialized ordering, for example, and its social and political orientations.

Situatedness extends beyond the question of racial appearance as well, and the physical reading of the body; sexual orientation is equally made to matter within dominant heterosexual society, placing emphasis on the straight life that comes to cast other sexual behaviors and orientations as “deviant.” “To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must ‘turn away’ from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant” (Ahmed 21).

Following these perspectives, Ahmed poses the concept of “queer phenomenology” to challenge the seemingly neutral matters of worldly contact and how ideas of “free movement” are defined (or assumed) by way of a white, heteronormative imaginary and ideology. In contrast, Ahmed captures how orientation is a question of “lining up” – a “falling in line” often derived by way of heteronormative or-

dering, where “being straight” is often to “straighten up.” In response, Ahmed mobilizes a critical phenomenology, which can support the making of other alignments and movements. “Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view” (Ahmed 107).

I’m interested in following Ahmed, and what she emphasizes as “the work of reorientation,” in order to consider how enactments of non-normative worlding queer the acoustic, giving accent to the ways in which acoustic practices assist in processes of (re)orientation that upset the dominant tonality of a given place. Voices find resonance within certain environments according to the availability of particular acoustic matters – those who listen, or those things that invite one to speak or not, that acoustically welcome or support certain bodies and their sounds. The rhythms by which one moves are enabled or enhanced by material and social supports, while such rhythms may also work to demand entry, seeking to bend or break the shape of a given situation so as to move differently, to give expression to an altogether different pattern. Acoustic orientation is thus never only about the material supports that enable the movement of a specific sound, rather it contributes to the establishment of particular acoustic norms, setting definition to what counts as “good” or “fitting” sound – fidelity here must be underscored as political, forcing the question: fidelity to whom or what, and for what end?

Writer and scholar Nina Dragičević offers similar lines of thinking through her research into the culture of queer community life (Dragičević 2019, 2017). Focusing on the social environments of bars in the city of Ljubljana, and the formation of the lesbian disco, she highlights how sound and music, listening and an overall acoustic dynamic, contribute greatly to supporting queer togetherness, particularly when speaking out loud may put one in danger. Rather, the

articulation of lesbian desire partly turns upon a sonic axis, a queer acoustics, finding facilitation through the playback of particular music. Historically, Dragičević considers how the making of lesbian scenes within heterosexual bars (in the US for example) were greatly strained by an environment dominated by homophobia, which impacted on ways of socializing together. The playback of songs on a jukebox, for instance, came to assist in narrating otherwise unspoken communications, where potential partners may stand in or identify with singers, or those being sung to. Songs, in this sense, provided an acoustic affordance enabling the expression of lesbian desire, and importantly, for the construction and maintenance of a culture of queer life.

Extending her research into more contemporary situations, Dragičević moves from the jukebox, and the strict territorialization of heterosexual bars, to the live DJ and the lesbian disco. Within such spaces and scenes, lesbian desire finds greater traction by way of outright collective volume, a loudness that can “act against oppression” (Dragičević 2017). From the jukebox, and the undercover flirtations enabling an articulation of desire, to the DJ, and the collective volume of the lesbian disco, Dragičević captures a sense for the particular power of sonority in struggles and celebrations of shared identity. Finding orientation by way of such sonorities and expressions greatly affords world-making activity, that is, the making of a space and time that does not need to continually differentiate itself against heteronormative society. Rather, as Dragičević poses, the lesbian scene celebrates itself and each other by way of volume, and the making of a particular acoustic norm, allowing for a deeply emancipatory and affirming sense of togetherness.

Following Dragičević’s work, a queer acoustics as I’m suggesting poses an interruption or distortion onto the heteronormative tonal shape of a place to allow for other resonant flows or vibrational constructs, other communal worlds; queering the acoustic may en-

able the retuning of a sonic horizon, surprising a given auditory arena with the rarely heard or with an altogether different reverberation. A queer acoustic may give support by upsetting the acoustic training and positionality informing how one hears or listens, to critically agitate or color the particular leanings and learnings that affect what one is able to hear, and how that figures a sonic imaginary. In this sense, a queer acoustic might strain phenomenology with the noise of social conflict, the rhythms of particular identity struggles and desires, and the configuration of marginalized spaces and their histories, tensing given regimes of aurality so as to allow for the articulation of accommodations as well as resistances to emerge: to pose the work of acoustic justice.

ACOUSTIC JUSTICE

Acoustic justice is positioned to highlight the practices by which to rework the distribution of the heard, detuning or retuning the tonality of a place, and a given acoustic norm, so as to support the movements of bodies and voices, especially those put at risk by appearing or sounding otherwise.

Acoustic justice is a framework for understanding how one navigates the conditions of particular places, and how one may seek out and construct a path of (re)orientation, which is always related to struggles over belonging, of negotiating the social, political, and performative figuring of oneself and others. The acoustic modalities of such acts, from the rhythmic to the vibrational, the loud to the hushed, often work to support the movements of a shared collectivity, emboldening the energetic and ethical figuring of communal determination by way of the unifying or sympathetic potentiality of the auditory. Such movements and experiences are often the socio-material

basis from which communities or collectives acquire a sense for the possibilities of what one may compose within given environments or situations, extending from sonic warfare to acoustic welfare – from sonic force to acoustic care. And through which understandings of justice are played out in the everyday in terms of working at social equality and safety.

Acoustic justice is about expanding upon listening as an extremely dynamic expression of bodily power, as a sensual and deeply transformative capacity by which to express individual and collective understanding and collaboration. Listening as a broader capacity to attune and attend, to hold and nurture, defend and debate, and which supports reflection and sympathy, compassion and care, for oneself and for others, and that greatly assists in contending with dominant and prevailing systems that make and unmake bodies. As Silvia Federici poses in her argument on the need to reappropriate the body: “Our bodies have reasons that we need to learn, rediscover, reinvent. We need to listen to their language as the path to our health and healing, as we need to listen to the language and rhythms of the natural world as the path to the health and healing of the earth” (Federici 2020: 124).

Listening is captured as the means by which to learn the languages of the body, to attune to its inherent rhythms as paths of power and knowing, as well as healing. Against the colonial legacies of modernity, and conflicts over forms of life and the biodiversity expressive of a pluralistic world, listening is wielded as a capacity to contend with genealogies of capture and exploitative enclosure by explicitly forging a path – an acoustic frame by which to cultivate more considered approaches for being on the planet, which further entails a commitment to decolonization (Vázquez 2012).

Such an egalitarian and planetary view finds a compelling articulation in what Cormac Cullinan terms “wild law” (Cullinan 2011). For Cullinan, it is imperative that we radically adjust existing modes

of Western governance – grounded in legacies of what Rolando Vázquez highlights as the modern/colonial order (Vázquez 2012) – so as to work at greater ecological sustainability and flourishing. By way of wild law, Cullinan makes the argument for Earth governance, in which understandings of the legal status of the human subject be extended towards the Earth community as a whole, shifting the human-centric basis of law and rights in order to support a bolder planetary order. Such a view finds support by referencing Indigenous understandings and cosmologies, especially the concept of *buen vivir*. *Buen vivir* (or *sumak kawsay*) argues for an expanded understanding of “the good life” or “well-being” beyond the individual (and the concept of individual rights); rather, *buen vivir*, from an Andean cosmological view, understands well-being as a collective and planetary question and concern that exceeds the human. Increasingly taken on in a range of constitutional reforms, for instance in Ecuador in 2008, the “rights of nature” come to appropriate liberal concepts of rights in the making of new constitutional and legal structures. As Vázquez poses, “*buen vivir* signals the borders [of the modern / colonial order] and it gives voice to the outside of modernity” (Vázquez 1).

Cullinan’s “wild law” takes guidance from the concept of *buen vivir* and aims to elaborate upon the rights of nature, as what may productively guide Western systems of law in crafting more ecologically attuned policies. Importantly, Cullinan approaches attending to the rhythms and qualities of the natural world by way of listening. As he envisions: “If we want to participate fully in the dance of the Earth community we need to listen carefully for the beat and adjust our rhythm and timing accordingly” (Cullinan 2011: 137).

In this respect, returning to Federici’s call for “listening to the body” as a path toward health and healing, it is important to question in what way listening to the body takes place, or is given place, and how it may truly reorient larger systems and structures that situate oneself, or that impact onto the well-being of a greater social or plan-

etary body. How do I listen to my body? If I understand my body as an acoustic chamber, as something that resounds, how does it give way to such listening, accommodating or resisting it? And in what ways is such listening challenged or undermined by understandings of listening, by one's own cultural background, or the regimes of aurality that shape or direct one's listening – that inscribe onto one's listening ability a set of ordering (and straightening) lines? Or by way of technology, and the electroacoustic systems embedded within environments, which has always participated in defining listening's reach and abilities? Further, what might such listening generate or engender – how to carry this listening into the world and our communities, into the rhythms of planetary ecologies and the project of decolonization?

Struggles over recognition and participation often find traction by intervening upon the conditions that define hearing and being heard, voicing and being responsive, sounding and listening, which regulate or inform one's attention and orientation with respect to oneself and others. It is these conditions that are of concern, and which leads me to understand acoustics, or more specifically, acoustic justice, as those things one does in order to make listening to the body and each other possible, and that one may carry further, to underscore the importance of hearing a diversity of views and life-stories within institutional and public settings as well as bringing attention to the voices and rhythms beyond human sociality.

In this regard, it is important to articulate a critical acoustics, which can bring forward an interrogative view onto acoustics and its specificities. From my perspective, this includes arguing for an understanding of acoustic rights or principles in order to open pathways for elaborating how listening may be nurtured. Such a concern requires a consideration of the right to free speech, or the right of reply, as human and civil rights, and which dramatically entail acoustic understanding, or an *acoustic literacy*. In this regard, it becomes important to address the importance not only of the freedom of speech, but equally that of

setting the (acoustic) conditions in support of such freedom. This includes arguing for a deeper engagement with listening as what often fulfills the power and possibility of speech.

Is not the freedom of speech equally a question of the freedom of listening (Lacey 2013)? As Vázquez argues, listening performs a “critique” of the modern / colonial order by specifically supporting a relationality denied by modernity in which the arrogance of a universal Western voice forcefully silences others (Vázquez 2012). In what ways is listening constrained and undermined within institutional and public environments, and how might “listening as critique,” as relational opening or accountability, be enabled?

Fostering greater concern for listening from different perspectives, and from different cultural positions, can be articulated along a number of lines, such as the right to listen to each other, as the sharing and circulation of life-stories (King 2008), and which can help in attending not only to the said and the articulated, but equally facilitating concern for that which is missing, where listening acts as a creative “holding environment” (Griffin 2016): listening as giving room for what needs to be said and heard, especially that which tenses a given regime of aurality. Emphasizing greater engagement with listening in this way can also help move from nurturing human relationships, and elaborating a diverse public discourse, to acknowledging ecologies of human and more-than-human life in a sustainable manner: to support deeper attunement with a biodiverse planet by acknowledging the “polyphony” of its voices (Tsing 2015).

Approaching acoustics as a question of rights or responsibility along these lines can also allow for greater concern for education, where listening as a practice, a skill, a history, may be enriched, for listening supports the capacity for understanding, affection, responsiveness, as well as critical and creative inquiry, and is essential within learning environments. This explicitly gives way to engaging a politics of recognition, and questions of cultural identity, social mobility,

and institutional access, which includes contending with racialized or gendered acoustic norms and the affective economies at play within contemporary biocapitalism, which, as Federici suggests, are always instrumentalizing the vitality of oneself as a situated body. How to attend to the ways in which bodies – some more than others – are stressed and strained by forces of exclusion and discrimination? In what ways can such attention be sustained, made forceful within greater economies that fully capitalize on attention itself?

Acoustic justice further works at considering the technological or medical approaches to “hearing ability,” which draw out a bioacoustic politics – a politics contending with conceptualizations of life by way of sound and hearing, and thus to further address the issue of recognition by expanding understandings of language and voice to include the diversely abled, issues of translation and interpretation, and that attends to verbal and nonverbal, spoken and signed expression (Bauman 2008; Mills 2011). Finally, a focus on acoustic rights or principles works on behalf of an acoustic commons, as the commoning that may position sound and listening as social resources in manifesting a radical ethics of openness.

From the micropolitical to the macropolitical, from questions of subjectivity, positionality, and the complex experiences of listening and social orientation, to issues of institutional access, structural and systemic exclusions, and what might be gained from bringing acoustic knowledges into the framework of education and ecology, law and government, acoustic justice works across a diversity of issues and sites. The right to listen, as a counterpoint to the right to free speech, captures the necessity for turning toward what must be heard: the expressions often occurring outside or beyond the acoustic norm of distributed sound. In this sense, acoustic justice lends to the forming of gestures and practices – listening practices, wild practices, decolonial practices – that attempt to reshape the arrangements enabling such rights and principles, and in doing so, modulate the norms by which

we may encounter and enrich each other. This includes bringing a critical view onto the issue of rights in general, and the importance of challenging state sanctioned recognition; rather, acoustics, and the arguments I’m making here, may support enactments of poetic world making that do not so much redistribute the heard, in attempts at having a voice, but lead to another form of the sensible entirely.

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Listening, empathy and difference: towards acts of public mourning and solidarity

LUCIA FARINATI

My story acts here as a reflection on empathic listening outside the context of therapy. It looks at the role of listening in bereavement and how empathy might not always be possible. Empathic listening is often associated with the capacity to understand the emotions of others at a deep level and support them in a process of healing. But what happens when empathy sits outside the safe room of therapy? What kind of dialogic lis-

tening can take place instead of talking or narrative therapy?¹ Can art create a safe space for listening to narratives of trauma and loss?²

Every pain is important, yet every pain is different. 'A hierarchy of grief could no doubt be enumerated' (Butler).³ Grief, however, is treated differently across the globe. Especially in times of mass mortality and conflicts the conditions through which a certain life is grievable and which is not, which act of mourning can be public and which is banned, are constantly controlled by the State. Grief in this context furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order which again raises once more questions of equality and justice entangled with the capacity of registering people's voices, in other words, what can be understood as 'political listening'.

In her study *Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, political theorist Susan Bickford argues that 'political listening is not primarily a caring or amicable practice'.⁴ Although listening can often evoke ideas of empathy she posits political listening as a practice which is not prompted by friendship or consensus. 'Political friendship is not emotional friendship based on love, intimacy and closeness but on respect, acknowledging others as different from us yet, like us, a unique who'.⁵ According to Bickford political listening requires both openness towards the other and self-involvement rather than self-abnegation or absence. Informed by an 'intersectional' approach rooted in the work of feminists of colour Bickford pictures listening as a journey or bridge to travel on together, as a political practice that leads towards solidarity.

Contrary to fictitious ideas of solidarity predicated by the State in terms of a 'mutual us', solidarity is proposed here as 'a separate space where political equality is enacted' (Bassel).⁶ Listening is a challenge for solidarity and joint action in that 'it treats the other as a partner in political action, treating the oppressed as actors and equals, and not merely as victims. Solidarity means regarding others as capable of taking an interest in the world and speaking for themselves, capable of political action, and therefore to be listened to and not just simply cared for'.⁷

MY STORY

When I was 17, I lost my father tragically, and four years ago I lost both my mother and brother within a short space of time. Since my 30s I have experienced psychotherapy, holistic therapies, and more recently bereavement counselling. During the self-isolation of lockdown, I continued the bereavement process on my own, yet the trauma experienced by the death of millions of people made me feel that I was no longer alone. The impossibility for many people to gather at funerals or organise rituals of public mourning made me reflect on the role of listening and empathy in bereavement. How to mourn mass death? What does it mean to listen empathically in situations like the pandemic? Is empathy possible or helpful in traumatic situations?

In the past four years, I was convinced that my sister would understand my grief, as we had experienced the same losses. I assumed that she could feel and listen to my pain as her pain (in Italian *sentire* means both feeling and listening) and so we would become much closer to each other. However, I was wrong. She wanted distance and more time before allowing an encounter. While I felt almost rejected by her, I also realised that one of the biggest obstacles in the way of reaching my sister was my inability to create a safe space in order for her to speak out. I did not understand that my sister's pain was different from my own, that the bereavement process in relation to the same father, mother and brother was profoundly different for each of us. Instead of being reunited through loss, paradoxically loss became a barrier between us. Empathy in this scenario is not only impossible but may trigger negative emotions and the wrong kind of emotional responses. Every pain is important, yet every pain is different.

CONCLUSION

I understand that to regain the relationship with my sister, I don't need to feel or imagine her pain as my own, but to allow her grief to manifest itself as something different from my own. The possibility of reconstructing our sisterhood lies on the risky path of opening ourselves up, listening to each other's story not merely as a shared family history, but as two unique stories, distinct from each other. To allow this to happen we both need to embark on the journey of re-building a new home where it is possible to meet again, defeating the death anxiety ingrained in our thinking.

This reflection on difference, listening and solidarity goes beyond the framework of sisterhood determined by principles of sameness and/or identity politics: I am you, therefore you are me. Building on from an intersectional reflection on the politics of listening and mourning,⁸ I would like to propose that pain acts here as a profound catalyst for understanding and recognising difference. In cases of traumatic experiences empathy might not be possible or simply might not produce a space for resonance, reciprocal mutuality and symmetrical esteem (Honneth)⁹ but might provoke instead distance, dissonance, conflict or simply silence. I therefore consider solidarity not as an assumed binary mutual relation but rather as a relational process that involves new forms of care and requires the 'redistribution of risk and discomfort' in creating a safe space for listening and speaking (Dreher).¹⁰

The current situation of the pandemic seems a great opportunity to rethink the politics of mourning and listening as solidarity and care.¹¹ In contrast to individualised and privatised forms of grief, I see the act of mourning together as an act of public life, and indeed a political act in which it is possible to regain the space for freedom in solidarity with the living and the dead. To care for our lives as well as for what it is in the Others that we have lost, might be the first step.¹²

*The earth is beneath our feet, the sky above,
Someone will hear this call.
For we can hear each other, and freedom is near ...*

— Fred Dewey, *Calling All Freedom Ancestors!*¹³

London, 13 June 2021

NOTES

1. See for example Alice Morgan, *What is narrative therapy?* Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000.
2. See for example, Sotelo Castro, Luis Carlos. 'Not Being Able to Speak Is Torture: Performing Listening to Painful Narratives'. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 14, no. 1 (2020): 220-231.
3. Judith Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso, 2006, p. 32.
4. Susan Bickford, *Listening, Conflict and Citizenship. The Dissonance of Democracy*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 2.
5. Bickford, *Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, p. 80.
6. Leah Bassel, 'Listening as solidarity', in *The politics of listening*, pp. 71-87. London: Palgrave Pivot, 2017.
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11. George Yancy (2020) *Judith Butler: Mourning Is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and Its Disparities*, interview with Judith Butler, *Truthout*, 30 April 2020: <https://truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/>
12. A reflection on memory as 'a capacity to make the dead living' and sustains forms of collective resistance and care is offered by feminist Silvia Federici (2019) 'The Common is upon us. Principles of Health Autonomy. Forewords', in (ed.) Carenotes Collective, *For Health Autonomy. Horizons of Care Beyond Austerity – Reflections from Greece*, Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2020.
13. Fred Dewey, *The School of Public Life*, Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2014, p. 228.

BIOGRAPHIES

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay is an artist, media practitioner, researcher, and writer. Incorporating diverse media, such as sound, text, and moving image, Chattopadhyay produces works for large-scale installation and live performance addressing contemporary issues of climate crisis, human intervention in the environment and ecology, urbanity, migration, race and decoloniality. Chattopadhyay has received numerous fellowships, residencies and international awards. His works have been widely exhibited, performed or presented across the globe, and published by Gruenrekorder (Germany) and Touch (UK). Chattopadhyay has an expansive body of scholarly publication in the areas of media arts and aesthetics, cinema and sound studies in leading peer-reviewed journals. He is the author of three books, *The Nomadic Listener* (2020), *The Auditory Setting* (2021), and *Between the Headphones* (2021). Chattopadhyay holds a PhD in artistic research and sound studies from the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts, Leiden University, and an MA in New Media from the Faculty of Arts, Aarhus University.

Lucia Farinati is an independent researcher and a curator who lives in London. She studied on the Curatorial Programme at Goldsmiths University of London (2004), and was awarded a PhD from Kingston University on the subject of *Audio Arts* magazine (2020). Her research focuses on dialogic practices and methodologies investigating the role of listening at the intersection of art and activism, the history of the artist interview, and performativity in the context of sound and feminist archives. She has curated several sonic art projects under the collective name Sound Threshold. She is the co-author of *The Force of Listening*, Errant Bodies Press, 2017. www.soundthreshold.org

Brandon LaBelle is an artist, writer and organizer living in Berlin, as well as founding initiator of The Listening Biennial and related Academy. His work focuses on questions of agency, community, pirate culture, and the poetic imagination, which results in a range of collaborative and para-institutional initiatives, including: Beyond Music Sound Festival (1998-2002), Surface Tension (2003-2008), Dirty Ear Forum (2013-ongoing), The Imaginary Republic (2014-19), The Living School (2014-16), Oficina de Autonomia (2017), Communities in Movement (2019-current), among others. In 1995 he founded Errant Bodies Press, an independent publishing project supporting work in sound art and studies, performance and poetics, artistic research and contemporary political thought. His publications include: *The Other Citizen* (2020), *Sonic Agency* (2018), *Lexicon of the Mouth* (2014), *Acoustic Territories* (2010, 2019), and *Background Noise* (2006, 2015). His latest book, *Acoustic Justice* (2021), argues for an acoustic approach to questions of social equality. Since 2011 he works as Professor at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design, University of Bergen.

Carla J. Maier is an independent researcher based in Berlin/Germany. She was recently Marie Curie research fellow (2018-2020) at the University of Copenhagen/Denmark with her project “Travelling Sounds: A Cultural Analysis of Sonic Artefacts in Postcolonial Europe”. She has published on modes of listening and sound practices in electronic dance music, sound art, skateboarding, urban space & around public monuments. She is author of the monograph *Transcultural Sound Practices: British Asian Dance Music as Cultural Transformation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Israel Martínez (Guadalajara, Mexico, 1979) Seeking to generate a social and political critical reflection, and often exploring stealth as a communicative situation of deep relevance currently, Israel Martínez

works, either for research or as a thematic line, with sound as a starting point to create pieces and projects usually materialized in multichannel audio installations, video, photography, actions or performances, texts, publications, and interventions in public spaces. In 2007, he was granted an Award of Distinction in Prix Ars Electronica, and in 2019, he was a winner of the CTM Radio Lab Call in Berlin. He has had solo and group exhibitions in spaces such as Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, MuseumsQuartier, MACBA, Moscow Biennale, TEA Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, daadgalerie, Haus der elektronischen Künste Basel, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, MUAC, Museo Universitario del Chopo, Museo Arte Carrillo Gil, MUCA Roma, Museo de Arte de Zapopan, among others. In 2012 he was part of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, and in 2014 of the residence program of MuseumsQuartier in Vienna. He has published discography and editorial work through Sub Rosa, Errant Bodies Press, Aagoo, The Wire, Hatje Cantz, Abolipop Records and Suplex.

Sara Mikolai is a Sri-Lankan German dancer and choreographer from Berlin and is currently based in Colombo. With a background in Bharatanatyam, today she extends explorations of body and space in interdisciplinary formats, which take form in performance, sound, video, writing and installation works. Through a practice of listening and research, her work focuses on a critical and poetic engagement with epistemologies of dance through decolonial strategies, queer reclamations and ecological reflections. Sara graduated in Dance, Context & Choreography at HZT Berlin, as well as in the MFA in Performing Arts program at the Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavik. She further holds a diploma in Bharatanatyam from the Oriental Fine Arts Academy of London. Currently she is engaged in the MPhil in Fine Arts program at the University of Peradeniya, in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Daniela Medina Poch (born in Bogotá, based in Berlin) is an artist and researcher who likes to write. Through site-specific, research-based work, her practice explores unconventional approaches to environmental intersectionality, debordering and de-othering. Observing everyday life correlations between language, identities and territories, her work aims to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and categories which perpetuate asymmetric power relations. Daniela is currently part of the MA program at Kunst im Kontext - Universität der Künste Berlin, CO-RE collective and the Neue Auftraggeber network. Her collective shows include Raupenimmersatism, SAVVY Contemporary, End to End - Transmediale 2020 C& Center of Unfinished Business, Berlin, VII Bienal of Performance, Galería Santa Fé, Bogota, Future Heritage – The New Normal, Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá, Perforartnet-Artecámara, XIV ARTBO Fair, Bogota, and Fatídico Festivo, Blue Project Foundation, Barcelona, among others.

Yang Yeung is a writer of art and an independent curator. Her recent publications include an exhibition essay for Francis Alÿs' solo exhibition *wet feet__dry feet*, a review of Sumei Tse's practice in the *Taipei Fine Art Museum Journal*, and a review of Kwok-hin Tang's practice in *Yishu*. She founded the non-profit soundpocket in 2008 and is currently its Artistic Director. She initiated independent project *A Walk with A3* (HK, 2015-7) to support the right of art to be in the streets. She was awarded the Asian Cultural Council Fellowship in 2013-14. In 2019, she was art writer in residence with Contemporary Art Stavanger (Norway). Yeung is a member of the international research network Institute for Public Art, member of the independent art critics collective Art Appraisal Club (HK) and the International Art Critics Association (HK). She currently teaches classics for global learning at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

THE LISTENING BIENNIAL

July 15 – August 1, 2021

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