

Acoustic Tension. Listening to the Contemporary

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Number 103, October 2014, February 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/72967ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

2368-030X (print)

2368-0318 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gangemi, R. (2014). Acoustic Tension. Listening to the Contemporary. *ETC MEDIA*, (103), 67–73.

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*Stay, illusion!
If thou hast any sound,
or use of voice,
Speak to me.*
W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

April 1952, Cannes Film Festival. The screening of *Tambours du jugement premier* by François Dufrêne, a film without screen or film. The theatre is charged with the “para-acousmatic” sounds of Marc’O, Gil Wolman, Guy Debord and Dufrêne: dispersed through the space, they recite aphorisms or produce sounds while the house lights flash on and off, creating a kinetic effect.¹ Here, lettrist cinema, foundational to the Situationist art movement, invents action instead of image. Sixty years later, its radicalism still haunts our minds like a phantom without our being able to really measure its impact on art history. And we love outspoken spectres, especially if they have something powerful to say to those who know how to listen.

Listening periodically surges in the “contemporary” art world of ideas to claim the primacy of *listening* over *seeing* through polyphonic manifestations, and to question the very essence of art through innumerable artistic micro-explosions.

If the path of modernity and the synaesthetic relationships between various expressive languages of communication are marked by an investigation of how art and sound intersect, we easily notice a renewed interest, in recent decades, in the practice of listening intent on rethinking our “political” consciousness. The artists who most compellingly investigate this meaning mainly use the mediums of installation and action to expose/compose a narrative that is revealed through our auditory attention, focus and perseverance, our sensibility and ability to comprehend what we hear or could “hear.”² Some of these artists question/use the medium to raise questions, defend causes or challenge conventions. Consequently, the recipient of these sound “objects” that, according to Berit Fischer, engage in *parrhesia*³—in which telling the truth, without reservation, creates a space of risk for the teller—can only be considered as active, reactive, in expectation and in action.

The convergence of art and sound implies total sensory immersion, antithetical to the silence of museums dominated by the visual element. Despite



Loris Gréaud, *Crossfading Suitcase*, 2004.
Courtesy of FNAC, Paris and Fondazione Prada.

increasingly frequent exhibitions around the subject of sound, the focus is often on the visual rendering of acoustic space, rather than the reflection triggered by representations of audio practices, for it is obviously riskier, as regards the reception of the project, to exhibit the volatile, the immaterial, the invisible, the silent, the noisy, the discursive, that is, to demand, by soliciting an implicit meaning, effort of an auditory-cognitive-imaginative-conceptual

Installation view of *Art or Sound*, presented at Prada Foundation, Venice, 2014. Front: Laurie Anderson, *Numbers Runners*, 1979. Back: William Anastasi, *The World's Greatest Music*, 1977. Courtesy of Prada Foundation.



nature. This is nevertheless the course of three exhibitions-pretexts that have raised questions and provoked visitors/listeners this year, tracing an imaginative common thread between Luxembourg, Italy and Belgium.

The modes of listening and embodying sounds are as varied as are their modes of production. Without getting lost in the vast world of “sound studies,” the Casino, in the capital of the Grand Duchy, has become a majestic sound box for the days of the exhibition, elegant and understated, inviting visitors to consider listening as a narrative of socio-political issues through a selection of recent work in various mediums, exclusively or predominantly exploring this primary sense in order to convey messages that can no longer be explored through the medium of sight (since, in any case, we have already seen almost everything). The title of this “show,” in which nothing much is shown, comes from an Old English word, *hlysnan*, “to listen.” *HLYSNAN: The Notion and Politics of Listening*, with the abovementioned Berit Fischer and Kevin Muhlen as its conductors, includes a group exhibition and an accompanying publication with contributions by the participating artists,⁴ performances and workshops, focusing on the active act not merely of hearing—which typically refers to automatic or passive sound perception—but rather specifically on intentional, deep, immersive listening. The artwork, understood as action, gesture, attitude, event, but also as taking a position, exists in its immanence as long as our ears are alert and the transmission apparatus is on...

Some of the investigations concern the vocal gesture in specific situations like political speeches and legal



Anna Raimondo, *Gender Karaoke*, 2013.
Site-specific participative sound installation
(karaoke, dvd, projector, par lights).
Courtesy of the artist and ArteContemporanea,
Bruxelles. Photo: Léa Beloussovitch.

contexts, or recording techniques and their impact in regard to documenting, writing and (re)creating history, and shaping our culture and reality. Among other aspects, the exhibition explores the contradictory essence of “repair”—we must first destroy in order to rebuild, as proposed once more by Kader Attia, who explores reappropriation via a bird’s resistance to deforestation—, and silence as essential to waiting in Marco Godinho’s sampling of sounds. And while Yoko Ono can call the Casino at any time and have anyone answer thanks to *The Telephone Piece* (1971), we must not forget that, in 1969, Walter De Maria similarly explored the conceptual potential of this medium in *Art By Telephone*.⁵ Emeka Ogbob shows how public speeches could support the utopian ideals of the Nigerian people, chiefly thanks to the hope placed in independence, in *The Ambivalence of 1960*, a collage excerpted from famous speeches given during the official ceremony of Nigeria’s declaration of independence in 1960. Forty-five years later, the same speeches seem symbolic of broken dreams: the meaning of the same audio framework has thus completely altered in a few decades to now evoke diametrically opposed sentiments. While the Casino emphasizes the experience of emptiness, of perseverance and receptivity through individual, even intimate discovery, focusing on social and political subjects until November 2014, the Prada Foundation urges visitors to let themselves be transported by *Art or Sound*, an encyclopaedic exhibition of noisy paintings, melodic sculptures and ready-mades of all kind curated by Germano Celant. A clamorous labyrinth of hisses and screeches contains 137 works, whose sounds persist from one space to another to intersect in an erudite cacophony. Many sophisticated adventurers are showcased; they come from different parts of the world and eras to explore the conversion of images into sounds and vice versa, or interact with the public to create any kind of resonance, halfway between performance, sound experiment and installation. Of note is the precursor *Number Runners* (1979) by Laurie Anderson, but also the more recent *Crossfading Suitcase* (2004) by Loris Gréaud, and *Marble Sonic Table* (2011) by Doug Aitken. *Imagine (Double Psalter)* (2012) emerges from this skilfully arranged din to tackle our reflections head-on. This series of musical instruments was made by the versatile Mexican artist Pedro Reyes, who has found his own way of symbolically revolting against the violence in his country by reshaping instruments of death into instruments of life.⁶ Using all kinds of firearms, 6700 of which were seized by the Mexican government in Ciudad Juárez, a city with a bad reputation, the artist created a true orchestra of 50 instruments. Art and activism are also crucial to the research of Anna Raimondo,⁷ a voice to be reckoned with. In Brussels, at Arte Contemporanea—a place of experimentation with a marked interest in young visual artists and a clear aim of supporting experiments that involve the sense of hearing—she is presenting a work whose medium makes full use of the artist’s

vocal cords and whose criteria entail “relational aesthetics”⁸—art as a state of the encounter, the inter-human, proximity, resistance to social formatting, in which notions of proximity and immediacy operate. Anna Raimondo conceives of her works as social interstices, which, in addition to their market or semantic value, transform into invitations to participate in the complex and contagious process of developing a social conscience that is associated with listening. The artist questions without providing answers, or rather provides answers without being questioned. Her voice, in all its uniqueness and particularity, stands out as the main focus of the investigation and the intervention. In the solo show *Beyond Voice. Me, you and everyone who is listening*, she traverses the urban space to intrude into others’ acoustic territories. The voice, a contaminated and contaminating agent, overcomes the conventional boundaries between public and private spheres. In the video *Encouragements* (2014), after having collected the encouragements of women of varied ages, origins, sexual and religious backgrounds, the artist walks through Brussels’ public spaces broadcasting them. By using these texts in an imaginary conversation on her cell phone, she sows words like grains that are disturbing, tender, troubling and other. The immediate, somewhat playful effect is certain, although the extent and porosity of speech being circulated in a poetically accidental manner are definitely unpredictable.

In another video, we see a glass being filled drop by drop until it overflows. During this time, a voice repeats the word *Mediterraneo*—the work’s title—like a mantra, which gradually deteriorates until it becomes unintelligible and disappears, as though drowned. In this case, both the image and the sound express the metaphor well, but the result is in fact not the same. Listening only to the voice without seeing the image is more effective than doing the opposite. Whether or not the message is carried across, a feeling of empathy only occurs thanks to the intervention of the voice, which captivates and penetrates us until it carries us along with it.

The artist’s voice is also the co-star of *Me, Lucia and everyone who is listening* (2014), a Dadaist collage taken from a conversation between Lucia Farinati and Anna Raimondo. Their vocal ping-pong is broadcast by two radios⁹ (Belgium celebrates the centenary of the first radio broadcast this year) facing each other in the gallery’s office. Of note, among the works exhibited, is the reading list of *Gender Karaoke* (2013), a collection of famous songs taken from various times and cultural contexts, which convey a problematic representation of women that is sadly still current.¹⁰ The artist, setting up a karaoke in which the genders of the songs’ subjects are reversed, invites the public to sing her songs. A feeling of amazement is easily achieved, as shown in a video accompanying the installation. The Situationists would certainly have appreciated how Anna Raimondo intelligently provokes those whose ears she reaches with her wandering sounds and disclosing words.

To conclude, and keep to the Kingdom of Belgium, it is

worth mentioning *Un-Scene II*, an exhibition presented at WIELS in 2012, which sketched out some of the questions driving the art-making of what some might call the emerging Belgian art scene, through varied mediums such as photography, painting, sculpture, installation, performance and video. Instead of an exhibition catalogue, surprise, surprise, a limited edition vinyl record was produced, since all the artists also worked, in one way or another, with sound. The adventure of art’s soundtrack is thus far from over!¹¹

Rosanna Gangemi

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

1 “The ‘sombre’ theatre, including the screen, was sunk in darkness. In the four corners of the hall, flashlights lit the texts of the four ‘tellers’: Wolman and Marc’O, were in charge of the ‘aphorisms’ (spoken at first, then sung), Debord read the images and I declaimed phonetic poems.” From Dufrené, François. “Une action en marge du Festival de Cannes 1952.” *Archi-Made*. Paris: Ensba, 2005. (Trans.)

2 The French term *entendre* (to hear) comes from the Latin *intendere*, “tendre vers” (tend or strive towards) in French, and also in Italian, although this meaning is obsolete; the French verb simultaneously means to listen and to understand. Of note is also the Italian verb *sentire*, which involves hearing and the other senses, as well as emotions.

3 Fischer, Berit. “On the Notion and Politics of Listening.” [*Hly-snan*] *The Notion and Politics of Listening*. exh. cat. Ed. B. Fischer. Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg, 2013. *Parrhesia* finds its incarnation in a radio drama offered as installation, *What we might have heard in the future* (2010/2014) by Angel Nevarez & Valerie Tevere, presented at the Casino. The script is in the aforesaid catalogue. Relative to *parrhesia*, also see Foucault, Michel. *Discourse and Truth: the Problematicization of Parrhesia*. Ed. J. Pearson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Installed in the crucial exhibition *Live in your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern, in 1969, (an exhibition that was recreated at the Prada Foundation in 2013), the work consists of a telephone and an advertisement bearing the artist’s statement in English and German: “If this telephone rings you may answer it. Walter De Maria is on the line and would like to talk to you.” That same year at the MCA in Chicago, Jan van der Marck presented the exhibition *Art By Telephone*, which involved asking a group of artists to orally relay instructions via the telephone for fabricating their works. The project referred to the historical precedent *Telephone Pictures* (1922) by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, a series of three paintings of identical composition but varied format, which the artist had made by an enamel sign factory based on instructions given over the telephone. In 2013, the experience was repeated concurrently as *Art By Telephone... Recalled* in six different places in the world.

6 Typically, once weapons are dismantled, they are buried. In 2008, to denounce the alarmingly high number of homicides in Mexico, his native country, Pedro Reyes decided to melt the metal of 1527 scrapped weapons to make the shovels needed to plant 1527 trees: *Palas por Pistolas*.

7 *La vie en bleu*, a radio piece of field and hydrophonic recordings, won first prize in the soundscapes category of PIARS-Sonic Arts Award 2014, in Rome.

8 Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002.

9 The artist, together with Younes Baba-Ali, created *here. now. where?*, a participatory project of sonic ambulation in the taxis of Marrakech, curated by Saout Radio at the 5th Biennale of Marrakech.

10 For example, a children’s song (!) called “Il était un p’tit cor-donnier” [He Was a Little Shoemaker].

11 For a special issue on contemporary art in Belgium, Maïté Vissault discussed the exhibition *Un-Scene II*: “Ceci n’est pas une scène.” *ETC* 99 June-Oct. 2013: 16-23.

Doug Aitken, *Marble Sonic Table*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and the Eva Presenhuber Gallery, Zurich, 303 Gallery, New York, and Prada Fondation.



