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# Poetics of Listening

Brandon LaBelle

**I**T HAS ALREADY ... begun ... the time ... the time-space ... of ... speaking ... a speaking that ... moves itself toward ... knowing nothing ... something ... you, the yous that arrive from ... the particularities ... as the basis for a giving ... enacting ... a rhythming of ... breath ... breathing toward ... away ...

As a field of artistic research and practices, sound art brings focus to listening as a particular sensory, perceptual experience and capacity. Through a range of methods and approaches, including spatial and instal-lational to performative and relational work, sound art positions the public as listeners. In doing so, listening is never only figured or conceived as a passive, receptive position; rather, sound art intensifies listening as an experience, inviting or demanding a shift toward more active forms and understandings. By way of sound art, listening is constituted as an experimental practice, one that involves itself in the world in such ways as to foster multiple or polyphonic conceptualizations of life and manners of existence.

I focus on sound art in order to highlight its place within a broader framework of artistic practice and to underscore how it dynamically introduces listening as a particular sensory, perceptual capacity and practice

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while equally defining it as a topic of research. I understand sound art ultimately as an art of listening, where a range of media and methods are crafted and deployed as means for mobilizing listening—evoking a *listening subjectivity*. If artistic practice can be captured as an arena of actions that seek to construct worlds of experience, sound art brings us into worlds in which subjectivity is aurally conceived or constituted. This is not to overlook the fact that sound art is never only sonic or strictly sounded and audible. Sound itself is elaborated as vibrational and haptic, visual and imagistic, embodied and disembodied, organic and machinic; it is pulled into a range of shapes and forms and is utilized equally as a method. Sonic methodologies often proceed by way of what sound evokes or makes possible in terms of conceptualizing pathways of orientation that work at attuning to the more-than-representational and that aim for a politics of frequency often shaping who or what is heard within given environments. Here, listening matters as the very capacity to attend to ethical, relational challenges and potentialities.

Sound art constitutes worlds that therefore lend to shaping an acoustic knowledge, an acoustic episteme, positioning listening as key to understanding. In doing so, it works at reorienting traditions of Western philosophy, and constructs of reason, that define the world by way of a visibilization of truth. Reason, as Gemma Corradi Fiumara argues, has been hegemonically held by the idea of an optical-rational capture, a position of “seeing is believing” that conceives the mind as an eye and analytical work as a process of illumination and arrival. In contrast, listening lends to an alter-logic, one less dependent upon displays of discursive strengths and ability, keeping rationality close to the material entanglements, bodily sensing, and limits of knowing.

Such views are grounded in an understanding of sound as an energetic figuring of worldly matters which is never quite graspable, reliable, or fixed and yet which delivers a profound presencing—sound as what animates and involves one in a spatial-temporal flow. As many wisdom traditions posit, sound acts as the carrier of cosmic presence due to its capacity to both envelope and exceed human experience and knowing; its vibrational, resonant movements (which provoke movement itself) are readily aligned with spiritual worlds and the bridging of being and not-being, the terrestrial and cosmic, the visible and unseen. While “seeing is believing” contributes to an individuation of reason, self-secure in its capacity to grasp the truthfulness of things in a logical manner, listening puts reason on hold, perennially in touch and supplanted by a movement toward others. As Fiumara suggests, listening moves *logos* to an *ecologi-*

*cal* position (16). Listening, as such, never quite lends itself to states (or an imaginary) of self-completion, nor does it fully control that which it encounters; rather, it follows and is frustrated by the temporal passing of things and continually enriched by the ecological terrains of aural meaning, allowing for staying with the uncertain, processual, and sensuous reality of surrounding worlds.

The alter-logic of listening contributes to a reasoning in touch with its own limits, which, as I'm interested to pose, necessarily opens one toward others: a reasoning that requires and follows others in the shaping of understanding. As an artist and researcher involved in sound art and sound studies, I follow listening as such a positionality: as one that affords collaborative processes. It has been my experience that sound affords relational, social, and collective practices and approaches as it is fundamentally a material or event that passes across bodies and things, people and places, figuring a range of sympathetic, affective and interruptive contacts and encounters (a touching that brings us out of ourselves). I emphasize sound (and listening) as being constituted by relationality, and as such it provides a rich and vital conduit for working at forms of collaboration and conversation as well as the co-making of knowledge. For myself, this allows for deepening methods and understandings of sound art as a relational practice; from spatial and temporal experience to dialogical and embodied processes, sound art *sounds out* paths of creative and critical engagement. Engagement by way of sound and listening, though, crucially extends what counts as engagement, for listening is never restricted to the meaningfulness of human sociality only, of a socially engaged art. Rather, listening is adept at finding links across human and more-than-human worlds, including that of machinic and inorganic bodies, dream-worlds and ancestral voices. To socially engage by way of sound art is to put sociality on hold, to delay or excite what counts as meaningful dialogue, and to interrupt constructs of recognition through an exposure to the unrecognizable and the unseen, the missing and the monstrous: a listening subjectivity always already touched by others, an other-other that staggers or remixes what counts as the self.

Following these perspectives, listening is embraced as a transversality within the sound arts, one that affords transdisciplinary meeting points. Or, rather, listening moves the arts toward an intensification of encounter and trespass, love and debate, rhythm and noise. Whether attuning to the unfamiliar and unknown, the invisible and hidden, as found within a range of environments, to creating critical approaches to social and political urgencies or searching for ways of attending to the inaudible by interven-

ing onto “regimes of aurality” (Kheshti 2015), listening by way of the sound arts is often what puts representation, identity, and language on the move, figuring an elsewhere to the orders of symbolic practice.

Finally, I’m led to characterize such perspectives by way of a *poetics of listening*, where poetics opens language to continual reinvention, as well as that of refusal—listening as what exposes or evokes an otherness (global, cosmic, ancestral) that resists its own naming. A poetics of listening may therefore lend to what counts as literature by keeping us close to a sense or scene of human flourishing, a living and dying underpinning or suffusing the literary act. As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, literature names a form, a writing, that continually interrupts itself—it is defined by this ongoing interruption performed onto itself; a storying, I might say, always in touch with or tethered to the unnamable, reminding us how the human story is never-ending, always already incomplete, echoing with what Clarice Lispector simply calls “X.” X, here, both gestures toward a basic act of writing, a language specifically where there is no language—a negative-sign—that both names and un-names, delimits and exposes an outside, at the same time. An inexplicable, vibrant X as the ongoingness of life itself, an “unpronounceable instant” that vibrates but has no melody; that incites a poetic imaginary or drive, a literary act (as interruption) which, in this case, can also be captured or supported by way of listening—a *listening out* for the words (or melodies) that might emerge from under itself.

Within my own experiences as an artist, I relate to a poetics of listening by way of the experimental, an eXperimental approach to creative practice that takes guidance from listening’s relational, ecological reach, as what attends to presence and absence at the same time, and therefore interrupts the self as a project for itself. Through eXperimental formats and methods of collective or group work involving students and participants, peers and colleagues, I listen for ways to collectively work through issues and questions together, especially with an interest in enlivening attention and shared possibility, a thinking-doing that moves across disciplinary, cultural, and social lines. This includes pluralizing modes of collaboration by holding a time-space for speech as well as silence, breath as well as action, criticality as well as distraction. Drawing from a poetics of listening, in these contexts, makes it possible to nurture a form of radical hospitality, one that lays the ground for *something more*—a listening, a storying, a percussing or Xing, which keeps open the door to the noise of togetherness. Where ... struggles and desires ... shape and extend ... a time-space ... a movement ... between silence, the pausing along the way ... and the speaking forward, thinking aloud ... a volume made to fill and

in doing so, expose ... this room ... this gathering, as ... an ... a scene of transformation ... Xing into place ... reverberant ... and strange ... and

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