

Uncommon Sounds in Common Spaces

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A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

100 McCaul St, March 11–15

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

Abstract

Discovering uncommon sounds in common spaces provides a mechanism for breaking patterns of predictable listening. Unexpected sonic events draw listeners' attention and further sustain interest when nurtured with sensitive intentionality. I contend that through subtle yet powerful shifts of everyday behavior it is possible to facilitate diverse and meaningful shared aural experiences. My research investigates what perspectives and relationships might be forged through such an expansion of listening inside of entrance foyers, corridors and staircases in urban multi-storey buildings. I explore this dynamic using microphones, loudspeakers and radio transmission across a series of site-responsive sound installations. These sonic and spatial interventions encourage varied modalities of listening and participation. In this context, my intention is not so much to create new sounds; rather, it is to amplify what is occurring in the environment.

Keywords: Agonism, Listening, Site-Responsive Art, Social Space, Sound Installation.

Acknowledgements

To family, friends and colleagues—both near and far—along with OCAD University faculty and staff; this work is the result of the many sustained intensities we’ve shared together. To an exceptional advisory team—Dr. Adam Tindale and Dr. Caroline Langill; your mentorship is what helped to turn ideas into actions. To Dr. Kathy Kiloh (OCAD University) and Dr. Mitchell Akiyama (University of Toronto); I am grateful for the crucial feedback you each provided regarding my work. To my partner in life (and the best listener I know), Rachel; your kindness, patience, generosity and honesty makes everything (and anything) possible.

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Preface

I started taking drum lessons when I was eight years old. What began as a routine after-school activity eventually became a critical part of my identity. Nine years later, I embarked on an undergraduate degree in music performance. At first—like many students striving for mastery—I prioritized *virtuosity*. However, my teachers encouraged me to instead focus on *intention*. So, with a set of sticks in my hands and a drum kit in front of me, I worked to articulate my ideas with clarity, efficiency and conviction. My approach to this task was greatly influenced by jazz music. In particular, the canon of artists who realized a conceptual expansion of improvisation from the mid 1950s to early 1970s. I listened to countless recordings from master musicians in an attempt to comprehend the connections underpinning a seemingly chaotic yet entirely orderly system of logic. Part of this process included the painstaking transcription of complex polyrhythmic drum solos. It was slow work that required stamina and perseverance to gain an understanding of how everything worked together. Undoubtedly, it is one of many diverse yet related musical activities that shaped crucial aspects of *how I listen*. I think that, in no small part, what I learned as a musician continues to play a role in nurturing my own larger practice of careful and sensitive listening that extends beyond disciplinary boundaries.

Over time, I have built and sustained a commitment towards sound as an interdisciplinary pursuit. I bring my knowledge and expertise as a musician, but if possible, I prefer to work outside of strict musical structures and systems. In the same way that I came to understand improvised music, I have also come to understand sound—and its constituent parts—as being shaped through assemblages of relational processes. Even though sounds can be fleeting, I find the materialities that shape listening have a certain fixity or stability. No matter how simple or predictable a sound (or combination of sounds) might seem on first inspection, I think there is always more to learn if you listen closer. In this sense, I often focus on what many try to block out, or avoid; subsonic hums, buzzing appliances, rattling pipes, or any number of sounds produced by contingent actions or unintentional circumstances. In a broader sense, I have worked to make this part of an everyday practice. In doing so, I listen not to capture, alter or dismantle, but rather, because I think sound in all shapes and forms helps me to understand the world—and my place in it—more clearly.

One of the risks associated with the unprecedented choice our new media tools offer is an ever-increasing need to literally and figuratively “hear what you want,” fostering intolerances both sensory and political. But at the same time, new media’s din of mediated voices—diverse and democratic, yet overwhelming and often hateful—makes guarded listening a necessity for sensory and emotional self-care. In this context, auditory freedom of choice is a self-reinforcing necessity: both personal and political, “sensitive listening,” with all the ambivalence that term implies, becomes a central issue of our time.

—Mack Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*

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Careful listening is more important than making sounds happen.
—Alvin Lucier, *Reflections*

The Hum

I am standing inside the entrance foyer of OCAD University's main building in downtown Toronto. This common space is a non-place; a threshold; a transitory passage. Corridors branch off from its central nexus leading to classrooms, studios and offices, while elevators and staircases connect to several floors above. The residue of constant motion brings with it a sense of absence over presence. Although, amidst all this coming and going, there is something else that I notice; a pervasive hum. It is understated and easy to miss but fills out the physical expanse of the foyers' uncluttered concrete and glass interior with an intangible ambience. I thought, at first, that the sound might be part of a sound installation, or speaking more broadly, that the sound itself was intentionally subversive. However, as I take the time to ask people passing through the foyer about what they can hear, an intuitive logic guides most listeners towards a different conclusion. Without hesitation, they know that the hum is produced by the building's HVAC system. For many, it is a sound of everyday life; nothing more nothing less. That I am paying attention to the hum—and that the sound is alluring to my ears—says a lot, I think, about *how I listen*.

I have been walking for the past few hours and all the while, listening to the sounds I find in-situ. Before this, I was at the Eaton Centre, perched above the street in a glass tube that serves as a pedestrian overpass for those who want to cross from one side of Queen St to the other. In that space, and now the foyer, I am observing how sound in urban spaces might be harnessed to foster an enhanced awareness of the surrounding environment. Here, the process that is being enacted—air passing through large resonant metal pipes with small holes generating a humming sound—might be considered a monumental reminder, albeit a subliminal one, of how listening does not always need to revolve around the end result of the sound itself. Rather, there is much to be explored in the process of sonic making. I think that given its specific characteristics the hum is a

useful introduction to an idea that I have been holding close to me for some time; uncommon sounds in common spaces. The uncommon sounds I mostly find myself noticing are, in fact, the sounds of everyday life. If I can work to make these sounds seem out of place—to make them seem uncommon—then perhaps they may prove useful for bringing forth new opportunities to listen in common spaces

To my ear, the hum exists as one of the many hauntings described by theorist Eve Tuck and artist C. Ree in their *Glossary of Haunting*. In this text, they grapple with the implications of what lingers within the subterranean facade of everyday systems. They speak of the pervasiveness of seemingly insignificant things, that while not ghostly per se, can somehow catch you off guard (if only just a little), although they might in fact be entirely ubiquitous. For Tuck and Ree, acknowledging these moments is crucial for making sense of the bigger picture of daily life, insofar that they “unsettle our sense of space,”¹ but in the same breath (and in parallel to those who *see* ghosts and those who do not), there exists the dilemma of “how unnoticed they can go.”² While the hum could be categorized as an architectural resonance, I think of it as being part of a dynamic and relational system; one where some parts are obvious, but many more are hidden. At this moment, I am wondering what might occur if more people paid attention to sounds like the hum in the entrance foyer? Although, I am getting ahead of myself. The real starting point needs to be why should anyone listen to sounds in this space at all?

In common spaces, it is expected that people will choose to focus on their own listening agenda; conversations, music, podcasts, or even, nothing.³ In this same context, it is uncommon to find someone choosing to listen to naturally occurring sounds with a similar level of intentionality. Such an imbalance is dictated, in part, by the opportunities afforded for “self-making, self-defense, and self-control.”⁴ For example, with a pair of earbuds or set of headphones you can take control of personal auditory and/or mental space in a busy environment (negotiate internal/external chaos), perhaps in the pursuit of invigorating everyday tasks or mundane scenarios (boredom), controlling interaction (signalling do not disturb to others), or modifying your mood to suit the task at hand.⁵

¹ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (London: Routledge, 2016), 653.

² Eve Tuck and C. Ree, *Haunting*, 653.

³ Lindsay Mannering, “Now Playing in Your Headphones: Nothing,” *New York Times*, Dec 24, 2015.

⁴ Mack Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 4.

⁵ Michael Bull, “Investigating the Culture of Mobile Listening: From Walkman to iPod,” in *Consuming Music Together* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 134–135.

It seems that anywhere and anytime, there exists a voracious appetite to listen. And in this respect, I too sometimes use earbuds or headphones in common spaces. However, I feel uneasy wholesale trading one approach (unexpected listening) for another (predetermined listening). So instead, I take at least some time each day to listen—with open ears and an open mind—to the shared sonic undercurrents of the built environment. In the words of Karen Barad, “if we listen carefully, we can hear the whispered murmurings of infinity immanent in even the smallest details.”⁶

I am intrigued by public art projects that challenge audiences to reconsider the vitality of listening. It is perhaps within this context of artistic practice that I have become most acquainted with how situating uncommon sounds in common spaces might provide value for shared aural experiences. A good argument for this, I think, is made by artist Max Neuhaus. His legacy is one of permanent public projects that discreetly weave harmonically sophisticated musical drones into urban spaces.⁷ His most widely known work is an unmarked sound installation—*Times Square*—located in the middle of a nondescript pedestrian island in Midtown Manhattan, New York. While having no visible attributes, you arrive at its location to find a constant tone humming away at a relatively low volume. It feels as if the sound is hiding in plain sight. Try as you may to explain it to others, Neuhaus’ *Times Square* is tied to a very specific set of contingent circumstances, and thus, demands consumption through direct experience. Neuhaus rarely documented his work outside of schematic drawings, photographs and artist statements. He preferred that people listened in-situ rather than attempting to transpose the full experience to other sites using video and/or audio recordings. The third time I visited the installation, I met a woman from Louisiana who was visiting New York for the first time. She confessed that even though her friends wanted to check out the more touristy sights, that this was the only thing on her to-do-list; she had been waiting to visit the installation for several years. We listened together, had a great conversation about New Orleans, then parted ways. Sound installations are not like songs or podcasts that are made for life on the go; you cannot take them everywhere with you. But—as Neuhaus’ work demonstrates—that does not mean that sound installations cannot be a part of everyday life. And encountering these kinds of moments means that the conversations that are shared around them might be very different than the ones that would occur otherwise.

⁶ Karen Barad, “What Is The Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice,” in *100 Notes - 100 Thoughts*, No. 099, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 17.

⁷ Liz Kotz, “Max Neuhaus: Sound into Space,” in *Max Neuhaus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 93–94.

Furthering this notion of everyday alterations, I find myself gravitating toward the work of composer Pauline Oliveros and her proposition of listening as a series of relations rather than a modality of reception. This is apparent throughout an extensive collection of works she calls “sonic meditations.” These compositions are notated using brief textual instructions that are both informative for generating the work and provocative in foregrounding listening. Each piece was originally developed as a set of group vocal improvisations, and throughout the collection, she consistently articulates a past-present-future approach towards sounding (the making of sound) and listening. Oliveros’ intention is that each work can (and perhaps, should) involve the material action of making sounds, as well as imagining sounds, combined with listening to sounds and/or remembering sounds.⁸ In terms of bringing attention and awareness to listening in urban spaces, I particularly relate to Oliveros’ suggestion of focusing on sounds until they become unrecognizable; something akin to saying a word over and over until it loses any semantic value and becomes entirely abstracted. Reflecting on this idea, she breaks down a litany of attention and awareness as it pertains to listening:

Attention is narrow, pointed and selective. Awareness is broad, diffuse and inclusive. Both have a tunable range: attention can be honed to a finer and finer point. Awareness can be expanded until it seems all-inclusive. Attention can intensify awareness. Awareness can support attention. There is attention to awareness; there is awareness of attention.⁹

Enacting this sort of concentration when listening opens up what Oliveros’ considers a “field of sound.” Inhabiting this concept as an expanded interior-exterior space generates a useful connection to the wider environment and appreciation for its constitutive makeup. For Oliveros, accessing listening does not mean blocking out the world and focusing on the singularity of oneself. Instead, it is about understanding how sound connects and relates many diverse parts into valuable modalities of listening that differ from one person to the next.

With these ideas planted in my mind and the resources of graduate school at my disposal, I think it is time to progress onwards to make some of my own work. I want to know how everyday spaces might be reconfigured to offer new opportunities for listening, and specifically, for highlighting sounds that otherwise may not always be the centre of attention. Within this goal, I am interested in temporary interventions, rather than permanent changes. What kinds of sounds

⁸ Pauline Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1971), 2.

⁹ Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 139.

will draw attention and sustain interest without disrupting the functionality of common spaces like entrance foyers, corridors and staircases? What unexpected perspectives and relationships might be forged in these settings through the encouragement of a deeper engagement with listening?

2

What do you not have to do in order to produce a new sound?
—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Finding Space

I am interested in exploring the social value of common spaces by expanding opportunities for listening to occur. From lived experience, I know that one of the best ways to make people listen in public settings is through performance. For example, buskers on street corners or concerts in squares. Why not, then, work to command audiences' attention through a series of performances rather than sound installations? This is a good question—one that needs to be unpacked to push ahead with my project. Thus, this chapter will explore similarities and differences between performance techniques and installation strategies. In doing this, I seek to clarify the relevance of installation as a primary method of research-creation within the scope of my practice. As an introductory case study, I will return to Max Neuhaus—a formative figure in the realm of sound installation—who, with similar ambition to my own, departed from musical activities to work within the realm of site-specific installation. His approach to sound in public spaces will be contrasted against that of Ann Hamilton, whose work touches on similar ideas, albeit in different settings. Whereas Neuhaus wanted to move his practice from musical to visual art circles, Hamilton represents an outlook less caught up with shifting gears between disciplinary constraints. Within these two examples, I came to better understand how Neuhaus critiques the everyday while Hamilton—by virtue of her work existing within institutional settings—can critique similar ideas with an enhanced material engagement.

I would first like to address—from my perspective—what makes sound installations different to performances. As a starting point of reference, I have visited countless sound installations and witnessed thousands of performances over the past two decades. Like critics who have documented the changing conditions of contemporary art, I know that a driving force behind any installation practice, regardless of the specific media used or strategies employed, is the capacity of the

approach to foreground spatial awareness, emphasize bodily response, and enhance opportunities for interaction by audiences.¹⁰ Through first-hand experience, I have synthesized these attributes into an intuitive sense of what constitutes a sound installation. However, in contrast to my extensive experience as a performing musician, when I arrived as a graduate student at OCAD University, I had no installation practice of my own. A goal of returning to formal study was to realize a body of work that was grounded in meaningful intention rather than privileging aesthetic concerns. I knew that challenging myself through an MFA would provide the opportunity to think more clearly about what I was making and to clarify why it was pertinent to share my work in a broader context. The essential features of a sound installation are that they:

1. Feature listening (actual or imagined) as the central component of the work.
2. Insist on physical situatedness (site-specificity) for this listening to occur.
3. Function outside of a conventional linear or specifically time-based structure.

This last point—the notion of duration—hints at the most relevant aspect of installation for my own research interests. Put another way; every performance, by design, has a definitive beginning, middle and end. In addition, this chronological fixity means that audiences witnessing performances are conditioned (or required) to adhere to certain etiquette. For contemporary settings, this means that audiences should remain relatively quiet, stare at the performers involved, then applaud once everything is over. Sound installations are less predictable; there are sometimes instructions leading to a desired outcome, but often, audiences are left to figure out how to make sense of it all. Nonetheless, the shared DNA between sound and performance does translate into a performative bond and social orientation that is important to consider when thinking about installation.¹¹ In summary, for performances the audience looks from the outside-in, whereas with installations they are inside the work; *perhaps, they even become the performers themselves?*

Across this dialogue, I acknowledge that installation practices are linked to visual arts and because of this, often framed within gallery or museum settings. However, in principle, the concept is transferable to any kind of space. Here, it is appropriate to think of site-specificity. Put simply, some things are made exclusively for the sites where they are presented. Further to this observation, curator and art historian Miwon Kwon suggests several variations of the definition,

¹⁰ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

¹¹ Jim Drobnick, "Listening Awry," in *Aural Cultures* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 10.

derived from critics and practitioners; site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site-responsive, or site-related.¹² All of these feel helpful as descriptions that accentuate the ways that space and place combine to play an important role for diverse kinds of artistic practices. For my own purposes, I choose to use *site-responsive* as I feel the particularity of the term expresses my commitment to improvisation within complex environments as a method of creation.¹³ In this same way, I think of any sound installation as a laboratory where experiential sonic experiments are played out in real-time. While tackling this notion of connectivity within the realm of visual art, there is also the concept of “sound sculpture” to consider. This is defined by musician and writer Alan Licht as being a “sculpture produced with an inherent sound-producing facility.”¹⁴ It is fair enough to say that many sound installations could be classified as sound sculptures. However, I feel that for my own interest in creating works using mostly readymade objects to reproduce sound—for example, loudspeakers or radio receivers—that sound installation remains the appropriate description for my current body of work.

Sound installation as a distinct concept, separate from any other art installation incorporating sound or the notion of sound sculpture, is traceable back to Max Neuhaus. He introduced the term in the early 1970s to label his own projects “where the sounds were placed in space rather than time.”¹⁵ Neuhaus rose to prominence in the 1950s as a virtuoso percussionist.¹⁶ However, musical conventions limited his personal artistic ambitions. In the second half of the 1960s, he permanently departed from recording studios and concert stages. After experimenting with different installation strategies, from the 1970s onwards he solidified his approach in the form of sustained tones that were added to specific locations using hidden loudspeakers. The entirety of this work is locational; even if one of his pieces is unhinged from its site and reproduced in another setting, a new relational dependency would subsequently develop, thus substantiating a unique formation of the work.¹⁷ Throughout a series of notable works in urban settings, Neuhaus remained committed to showing within non-conventional spaces. He widely

¹² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 1.

¹³ Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments,” in *Canadian Art Review* 40, No. 1 (2015): 49–52.

¹⁴ Allan Licht, “Sound Art: Origins, Developments and Ambiguities,” *Organised Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009): 7.

¹⁵ Max Neuhaus, “Interview with William Duckworth,” in *Sound Works: Volume I* (Ostfildern: Cantz Verlag, 1994), 42.

¹⁶ Kotz, *Sound into Space*, 95.

¹⁷ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 33.

eschewed white-walled galleries or museums, and instead, saw greater potential in everyday spaces:

I wanted to make work that was part of people's daily activity. Rather than something that they went to at a specific time, an event, I wanted it to be continuous. I wanted it to be something they could pass through at any time, not something they had to plan and go to.¹⁸

When conceiving sounds to be used for his installations, Neuhaus claimed that his choices considered that for a site, "context is not only aural, but also visual and social."¹⁹ Regardless of this acknowledgement, Neuhaus seemed most excited about taking an aspect of the stage to the street; in some sense, to make under-examined aspects of performance accessible beyond the expectations of the stage. Neuhaus' insistent refusal to embrace concepts that may have aligned his work more emphatically with the "visual and social" context of the sites he chose, for many people, turns his installation projects into background noise. A quick anecdote to summarize this point; he was apparently frustrated by the Naked Cowboy, a busker who during the mid-2000s, would perform with his acoustic guitar (while naked, and in a cowboy hat) directly on top of his then-refurbished installation in Times Square.²⁰ This seems indicative of Neuhaus' constitution; one developed squarely within the framework 20th century formalism. Neuhaus undoubtedly broke new ground, but I am acutely aware that for my own research goals, I will need to celebrate, rather than control the social aspects of a site. Whereas Neuhaus first performed repertoire, then, made sound installations (that in many ways are compositions), I find that the spontaneity of improvisation—musical or otherwise—provide a more practical set of resources for my needs.

As an improvising musician, I know that almost any space can host a performance in one way or another. As I have since found, the same can be also said for sound installations. Although there are some spaces that are more suitable than others. Rather than embracing everyday (unknowing) audiences, installations formatted for galleries or institutions are often positioned in specialized spaces—for knowing audiences. This is generally to facilitate sensory immersion or support technical requirements that are challenging to realize without dedicated infrastructure and resources. These settings may resemble other real-world spaces or be gallery-like but heavily altered. For example, the typical cinema-style black box space has also become a popular gallery

¹⁸ Neuhaus, *Sound Works: Volume 1*, 43.

¹⁹ Neuhaus, *Sound Works: Volume 1*, 42.

²⁰ Andy Battaglia, "A Sound From Underground," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec 26, 2012.

variation; it seemingly has immersion built into its cultural framing. However, a cinema—even one that is visited daily—is not, I argue, an everyday kind of space. In total, I think that what might seem lost in one sense is gained in another. Controlled installation practices undoubtedly still involve opportunities for critical listening, but in more limitless settings, artists can guide audiences towards different kinds of listening experiences. Whereas Neuhaus chose to reinforce sound by focusing on listening devoid of material embellishment, many other artists are willing to more explicitly embrace the connections between what can be seen, felt and heard.

For me, an important example of this is the work of Ann Hamilton and her extension of this sensory connectivity within the sanctioned framework of an institutional setting. Specifically, I refer to *at hand*—her installation from 2001 that was remounted at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. in 2018. Witnessing the work, you are presented with access to a generous sized white room that is devoid of any wall-mounted art or furniture. In this space the floor is covered (almost entirely) with thousands upon thousands of crisp white sheets of blank letter sized paper. Every twenty or thirty seconds, a mechanical system on the ceiling drops another piece of paper. This new sheet falls to the ground amidst the noise of the mechanism and the rustling of all the sheets of paper. Hamilton puts forward a suggestion for those who are in the room:

Can you hear the silence of the paper falling through air? The gestures and actions of a hand that might hold and the mouth that might speak from the rimmed space of the page form a litany of possibility. Your presence becomes part of the project—you are free to touch the paper and explore the space but please observe and respect it's quiet and slow rhythms. Try to listen to the silence of the paper falling through the air.²¹

This work piqued my interest in two important ways: First, as a simple yet powerful concept with remarkable execution that continues to inspire my own practice; Second, insofar as the gallery didactic suggested that *at hand* was a mixed media *sound installation*. This choice of description, although a small concession, opened my mind to think of any installation on specifically sonic terms. I began to conceive of ways that I could build relationships to tangible and visible things, as well as focusing intently on intangible and invisible processes.

²¹ Ann Hamilton, “at hand - Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden | Smithsonian,” Accessed Feb 1, 2020, <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/ann-hamilton-hand/>



Figure 1: *For Pauline* (outside), 205 Richmond St West, Toronto, ON, 2019.

For Pauline

The path paved by Neuhaus and Hamilton now leads back to my own work, and specifically, a preliminary project—*For Pauline*—building upon the influence of Pauline Oliveros. Leading up to its presentation, I first embarked on a series of experiments in my studio during the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019. A key factor of how my work was conceived related to the fact that my studio space featured an open layout and was shared with my fellow IAMD cohort. Thus, any decision to make sound meant having it directly impact my colleagues. The first experiment I shared (as part of monthly critiques) was an ad hoc sound installation where I affixed audio cables (that would otherwise be hidden) in stylized formations onto walls using bright yellow duct tape. This emphasis on the physical connection was intended to reinforce the sounds being heard; a multi-

microphone recording of the work being installed—most prominently, tape being ripped into small pieces—that was played back through four loudspeakers.²²

Over consecutive critiques, I refined the visual component of my burgeoning installation practice to fit within the context of gallery spaces. However, I increasingly felt that the gallery setting—although interesting for the visual development of my work—was not the right fit for the kind of projects I was envisaging. At the core of this, I was ambivalent about what kinds of sounds should accompany my spatial investigations in these settings. It seemed that although I could instigate almost anything I wanted, first, I needed to be clear about exactly *why* I was bringing more sounds into existence. It started to click during the final phase of initial experiments when I began to solidify the act of transmission—using short-distance FM radio broadcasting—as a central method of my creative process. I created several works by stringing out thin wire cables in site-responsive formations to make radio antennas. In addition, I obtained several portable FM radios to create mobile speaker configurations that could play back audio that was broadcast using the antennas. Using FM radio to transmit signals made any sound unpredictable.²³ It freed me from thinking directly about sound and instead, allowed me to start focusing on interaction and participation. In turn, this led me to a provocation; can I facilitate opportunities to stop and listen, that can be shared with friends or strangers, and that bring new meaning to the social dimension of an environment? How might these altered modalities of listening encourage relationships in *over-looked* and *under-listened* spaces?

Relocating acts of critical listening into non-specialized spaces presents a series of challenges. Bringing knowing people into those spaces is one thing but working with an unknowing audience is something entirely different. For example, in moving through urban passages, it is apparent that attention is a commodity of high value and intense demand. Many sounds gain immediate attention in heavily trafficked areas, but what I am most interested in finding out is how to sustain this interest over extended periods of time. My exploration of these ideas resulted in *For Pauline*; a site-responsive sound installation located in the entrance foyer and

²² I consider this experiment an homage to Robert Morris' 1961 *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. In that piece, Morris employed the same concept but for a sculpture rather than installation.

²³ FM transmission is a powerful way to spatialize sound wirelessly between speakers. In my opinion, for audio it is more flexible than many commercially available WIFI or Bluetooth options. However, its reliability is dictated by the strength of a transmitter and mostly, this means that the signal is corrupted by any number of variables; people, architecture, or as is often the case, other radio signals. For more on this subject, please see; Galen Joseph-Hunter, et al., *Transmission Arts: Artists & Airwaves*. New York: PAJ Publications, 2011.

exterior street of OCAD University's graduate studies building at 205 Richmond St West in downtown Toronto. It was active from 10am until 4pm on July 24, 2019 and consisted of three parts:

1. A digital playback device connected to a FM radio transmitter.
2. A radio antenna constructed from 20 metres of thin yellow cable.
3. Two portable FM radio receivers tuned into the transmission in the foyer space.

The audio transmitted was a pre-recorded reading of Pauline Oliveros' sonic meditation XVII, *Early: (For Kenneth Gaburo's NMCE)*:

1. Enhance or paraphrase the auditory environment so perfectly that a listener cannot distinguish between the real sounds of the environment and the performed sounds.
2. Become performers by not performing.

These instructions reflect the ideals of many early performance artists who invoked rules within their work. For example, Yoko Ono's contributions within the Fluxus movement of the 1960s or Allan Kaprow's *Activities*. In this circumstance, I did not suspect that by providing the instructions on loop that they would be enacted. Rather, I hoped hearing the instructions would cause audiences to reflect on the relationship between listening and performing.

To create the work, I first recorded my voice speaking the text. I arranged the recording to play on loop using a small digital audio playback device and attached it to a DIY short range FM transmitter that I constructed for the project.²⁴ Both playback device and transmitter were battery powered and positioned discretely out-of-sight. I attached one end of the antenna cable to the transmitter and used an improvisational approach to string the cable taught against architectural features of the building. I started in the foyer and progressed out onto the street. Where extra support was required, I used several small cement weights to hold the cable down. In the foyer, I placed a small FM radio receiver tuned to the frequency of the broadcast. The words that could be heard from the radio were affected and distorted by people walking past the antenna, particularly those on the street. However, the signal could be heard completely clearly from the radio receiver if the antenna cabling in the foyer was touched. This act of touch amplified the transmission

²⁴ Rob Kozinuk, "How to Build a One-Watt FM Transmitter Based on a Workshop by Tetsuo Kogawa," in *Radio Rethink: Art, Sound and Transmission*, eds. Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2004), 301–17.

strength by using the mass of the human body to boost the signal. The core premise in this was that to perceive the message, you must act, rather than just hear it passively.



Figure 2: *For Pauline* (inside), 205 Richmond St West, Toronto, ON, 2019.

Whereas my initial experiments and critique projects were developed as exercises to explore affective material gestures, sound itself was somewhat of an afterthought. Thus, a primary driver of *For Pauline* was a renewed focus on its sonic component. I wanted any sounds that were of my own choosing to be intentional and precise. At some stage it dawned on me that rather than attempt to generate a sonic piece entirely of my own conception, it would potentially be more effective to recontextualize an established work. At the time, it seemed obvious that I would focus on the work of Oliveros. By removing myself one step from the sounding process and sharing an existing composition, I felt instantly at ease in how the piece took on a new dimension when compared with previous experiments using constant drones. Nonetheless, far from being

something that encouraged audiences to listen, according to OCAD University security services, the sound of *For Pauline* was responsible for “spooking people out!” This was largely due to the transmission sounding distorted when the antenna was not touched, in addition to the recording of my voice appearing and disappearing intermittently; tuned in and out of audibility by variable actions that affected the signal. This was something I thought would inspire interest from passers-by. And while it succeeded in achieving this goal to some extent, it was less successful in drawing audiences in to listen for longer periods of time. While I am not quite there yet, I now understand that *listening to sound rather than making sound is what is driving my creative impulses*.

3

Sound occupies the *in-between*—between a source and a listener, between a space and another, between a body here and another there (and which are not always human or even visible)—and thereby brings into *contact* so many objects, bodies, and places.

—Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise*, 2nd ed.

Sonic matter(s)

I am moving through a corridor, aware of the space that surrounds me, wondering what sounds I can make to bring an awareness of the space to others sharing the space. Movement helps me to immediately grasp the collaborative realities of existence. An omnipresent example; I cannot move without hearing my body move in one way or another. As far as I can perceive, my own sonic space exists in direct relation with the natural world and built environment. With sound, it stands to reason that the value of its inherent leakiness—or tendency to move fluidly within time and space—is that sound is an immaterial-material. Thinking in this sense, I perceive that listening should not be considered an act; rather, as a relationship. I understand sound as part of a vibrational continuum of subsonic (below human hearing), sonic (potentially audible) and infrasonic (above human hearing). All three elements of sound can be configured in novel ways for multimodal configurations. While listening is easily relatable using past-present-future processes, as suggested by Oliveros, sound itself on any physical level is more firmly grounded in the present. I am interested in the ways that scholarship—particularly over the past two-decades—has aligned with a rethinking of matter and its importance to hierarchical frameworks. Theories fleshed out with this point of view are widely referred to under the banner of “new materialism.” A priority of this approach is the dissolution of hard boundaries between what is deemed as human and non-human.

New materialist thought challenges listening as a tacit activity. To listen is to engage in a process where there is not always a clear divide between physical process and audible outcome. Of the many scholars contributing to discourse within the field, I have gained great insight from Karen Barad. Specifically, for the expansion of Donna Haraway’s suggestion of “diffractive”

interpretations (in contrast to reflective practices) and subsequent development of the interrelated term “intra-action” (co-constitutive formations in contrast to interaction between separate entities).²⁵ However, I feel the strongest affinity with Jane Bennett. Through her work, she outlines a “vital materialism” to describe her overarching concept of “vibrant matter.” This rethinking of agential relations builds from Baruch Spinoza’s contributions towards notions of affectivity and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s absorption of these ideas into their concept of assemblage.²⁶ From my point of view, sound is very much a vibrant matter therefore listening envelopes as a vital materialism.

Bennett sees vitality in material terms as “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”²⁷ But further to this point, she states that “human power is itself a kind of thing-power.”²⁸ In her opinion, “all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.”²⁹ From this position within a world of vibrant matter, “to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.”³⁰ For Bennett, acknowledging this series of constructs leads to positive outcomes not only for humans, but for any given environment in its totality. I find this valuable for reconsidering the role of sound in many ways, insofar that as Bennett suggests “all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signaling.”³¹ In thinking of sound, it is both an assemblage in and of itself and within a larger set of relations. Bennett defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.”³² In furthering this, I share the opinion of Brandon LaBelle who thinks of sound in these terms of vibrancy, vitality and assemblage “as an intensity that moves objects and bodies into the world, extending their reach and relation.”³³ For LaBelle, “sound is fundamentally a vibrant matter, one that conducts any number of contacts and conversations—the rustlings and stirrings by which listening and being

²⁵ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 800–831.

²⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23.

²⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

²⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.

²⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

³⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 13.

³¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 117.

³² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.

³³ Brandon LaBelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018), 61.

heard takes place.”³⁴ Yet, as he importantly notes, such relations are also generated “through interruptions and agitations.”³⁵



Figure 3: *Refrain* (downstairs), 35 Prince Arthur Ave, Toronto, ON, 2019.

Refrain

I took part in two artist residencies over the summer of 2019. The first was in Florence, Italy where I was provided with a private studio space. At first, I was thrilled about this situation. But even though I had a studio, I was more attracted to spending time outside. Perhaps, it was the allure of the weather and my surroundings? In any case, by the end of the trip, I found myself still thinking of making work that had a lot to do with public spaces, and much less to do with gallery spaces.

³⁴ LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 61.

³⁵ LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 61.

Reflecting on Italy, what I started doing was making a greater number of field recordings in urban spaces than I typically would when at home in Canada. I tried at first to edit these recordings, to eventually compose an electro-acoustic composition, but over time felt that simply playing them back—unaltered—conjured the most affective results that I was interested in obtaining. In this sense of doing less, I felt I was reliving my experience of listening in and of itself. While there was a dislocation of sorts, with sound moving from one site to another, knowing what it all meant was still a way off. At this stage, the theory I had been absorbing day in and out had not sunk in enough to inform a deeper understanding of what was going on. What I did sense though, was that if people are active, then spaces are active. But, lost in the mix (for the time being) was how people might become attentive in these spaces.

As highlighted in *For Pauline*, I think that sound is an experiential way to explore the physical and social thresholds of public spaces. After my sojourn to Italy, I returned to Toronto for the second residency of the summer. This was coordinated in the classrooms of a private high-school, on loan to the artist-run *Roundtable* collective during the holiday break. At the culmination of the residency, I created a new site-responsive sound installation that continued in the vein of *For Pauline*. The work—*Refrain*—was split between all three floors of the three-storey school building in downtown Toronto and was active to the public during the residency closing reception from 6pm until midnight on August 15, 2019. The work combined the following elements in two distinct areas:

1. A vocal microphone.
2. Sixteen portable FM radio receivers.

The microphone was dropped down the central stairwell cavity dissecting the first and second floors. It was viewed hanging upside down from its cable and was highly visible upon entering the building. Moving up the stairs, the cable seemed to disappear once you reached the second floor. However, from this point, I had, in fact, connected the microphone to an out-of-sight FM transmitter (the same one used in *For Pauline*) and was transmitting the signal from the microphone wirelessly. In choosing a space for listening, I scouted the building over the course of the residency and decided upon a location far away from the microphone source. I chose to use small FM radio receivers (again, the same kind as used in *For Pauline*) and attached sixteen of them directly in the middle of sixteen windowpanes on a third level corridor. Each section of

window was slightly mirrored, so as day turned to night, there was a transfer between interior reflection and external visibility. Visually, the array of radios caught the attention of people who were wandering throughout the opening. They effectively stopped groups of listeners who would catch fragments of sound from the foyer emitted by the small inbuilt speakers in the units. Here, as before, the realities of FM broadcasting made for a fuzzy and fluctuating soundscape rather than a fixed and stable signal. However, in this case, the shifting ambience and movement of the sounds heard made it more desirable for audiences to stay for longer listening sessions.



Figure 4: *Refrain* (upstairs), 35 Prince Arthur Ave, Toronto, ON, 2019.

Along with exploring new sounds, a key interest within this work was determining the value of different spaces for my work. I wanted to better understand how environments might be altered or generated through both aural and architectural aspects of my sound installation practice. A central question I was pondering is whether the sounds I was choosing to foreground in my work became a sonic burden or social glue in the spaces where they were being heard? As a point of reference, many of the intermediate spaces contained in schools or universities are overwhelmingly utilitarian having been designed to maximize physical space, satisfy accessibility requirements and adhere to fire safety laws. In these settings where sound is something, that if discussed at all, is often about removal rather than addition. In thinking about how the spaces themselves might be theorized within this equation, I turn to Marc Augé's concept of non-place as a locational setting that is inhabited temporarily, but always remains a site of departure, rather than point of arrival.³⁶ The theory is informed by travel and pays specific attention to larger aspects of industrialized mobility. Augé gives examples of motorways, train stations, and airports, stating that "a space that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity is a non-place."³⁷ While I think this is a useful overarching concept, what I do not agree with is the division of relation. In my opinion, *all sites are relational*. However, as a broad stroke, I can take Augé's suggestion as a starting point for my own use. What perhaps can be gleaned from taking this notion of non-place and extending it towards a finer detail examination surveying transitional spaces that may in fact be partially place and partially non-place?

In *Refrain*, I chose to further accentuate the role of radiowaves. I refer here to Salomé Voegelin's discussion of radio and a different notion of non-place in relation to site-specificity:

Analogue radiowaves present a silent surface for an abundance of sounds to cross the sightless space of its medium publicly into the non-place of private listening. This is a non-place in the same sense that sensate sense is non-sense and that silence is nothingness: the non-place of radio is its site-specificity in my living room, your bedroom, his car; it is every space embedded and reflected by the serendipitous silence of its medium in the transient time of its contingent audition.³⁸

³⁶ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 78.

³⁷ Augé, *Non-Places*, 77–78.

³⁸ Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 113–114.

In this sense, I think of *Refrain* as a project that furthers the conceptual potential of radiowaves rather than exploiting the physical attributes and effects of transmission. With *Refrain*, I truly began to deepen my commitment to amplifying the sounds of where my work was situated, rather than enforcing a set of external sounds within the environment. Over the course of making recordings in Italy during the summer, I had become accustomed to paying attention to the mundane aspects of my surroundings; doors creaking as they opened and closed, water rushing through pipes, footsteps echoing up and down flights of stairs. With each of those examples, there is an insistent collaboration between tangible physical actions and intangible invisible energies. Removed from traffic, construction and other similar sounds that are ubiquitous in the external built environment, I am finding that these sonic moments thrive inside of buildings. However, I also observe that many around me ignore these kinds of sounds. I contend that avoiding everyday sounds in this way has social implications. Actively choosing *not* to listen has a ripple effect on how people relate to one another and the spaces/places they occupy.

4

Sound invites a different sense of what belongs together and where things belong.
—Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*

Finding Voices

Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to think of public space as a discursive series of social arrangements rather than any given site characterized by a physical footprint or permanence of location. For me, this is what has made the semi-public infrastructure of foyers, corridors and staircases particularly relevant spaces in which to explore an implicit political nature that exists within the public domain. I perceive this to be the case no matter how technically “public” or “semi-public” these spaces might be considered against, for example, street corners or squares. Further, I have found there is an unavoidable political conversation that has the potential to emerge regarding artistic activities that are situated in this context, regardless of whether a work itself is speaking directly to a politicized agenda. In this sense, I agree with Brandon LaBelle who suggests that choosing to foreground listening can help to underscore a shift where listeners’ attention and awareness can move from considering “the environmental to the political.”³⁹ Similarly, media scholar Kate Lacey positions listening as “a category that bridges *both* the realm of sensory, embodied experience *and* the political realm of debate and deliberation.”⁴⁰ Lacey asserts that acknowledging an “analytical separation of ‘listening out’ (an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition) from ‘listening in’ (a receptive and mediatized communicative action) opens up a space to consider listening as an activity with political resonance.”⁴¹ Eager to expand upon these articulations of politicized listening, I would like to bring forward a brief discussion regarding my research into the work of Post-Marxist

³⁹ Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 159.

⁴⁰ Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 8.

⁴¹ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 8.

theorist Chantal Mouffe. Her outlook aims to empower artists to foster opportunities in “making visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving a voice to all those who are silenced.”⁴² Although, to be clear, Mouffe in this context acts as a guiding light for a personal exploration that is slightly separated from my own current practice. In total her theories are offered to expand a conversation that drives me to keep making new work, yet they do not run entirely in parallel with what my own work actively generates. As such, this chapter is split into distinct two parts with very different end goals. The first uses Mouffe to better understand how public art practices might be thought of in both social and political terms. The second introduces my final thesis project and explores it as a continuation of previous MFA projects. The rationale for combining the discussion of one thing (political theory) separate to another (my MFA thesis exhibition) is that it seems timely with this phase of my research that I have created conditions that while not yet political, I hope will flourish into more politically active and socially nuanced projects over time.

From a predominately abstract rather than applied perspective, Mouffe proposes radical model of approaching democracy that I find useful when considering shared aural experiences in public spaces. Tackling the breadth of her theoretical engagement is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I feel it is worthy to focus for a moment on how she articulates the value of artistic practices in challenging normative social structures. I think it is true, as Mouffe claims, that you “cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense—and in that sense is political—or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it.”⁴³ Reflecting on this point, Mouffe sees critical artistic practice, rather than direct artistic activism, as an effective way to unsettle dominant hierarchies, and thus, meaningfully engage in what is broadly called “agonism,” but that she refers to specifically as “agonistic pluralism.”⁴⁴ Through this lens, Mouffe posits that sustained discourse without resolution is a necessary requirement of inclusive and politically meaningful projects.

I have been thinking about Mouffe’s ideas constantly when formulating new works in common spaces. For me, it has meant evaluating what it means to operate as an artist within these

⁴² Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 93.

⁴³ Chantal Mouffe, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension,” interview by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan. *Grey Room* 02 (Winter 2001): 100.

⁴⁴ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 91.

spaces and asking how I can provide multiple avenues for dialogue and discourse. With sound, it is easy to overwhelm and remove the desirability to enter or engage with projects housed in common spaces. Here, I am reminded of Mouffe's repeated insistence that power is sequential. That is, considering the reality that dismantling one system of power or normative state is always followed by the enforcement of another. I understand this more clearly by drawing a parallel to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "territorialization." Using this language, any territory—actual or theoretical—that is claimed by a new force is essentially being de-territorialized then re-territorialized.⁴⁵ When navigating this terrain, Mouffe argues that for artists, it is crucial to create conditions that do not "take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries)."⁴⁶ In this sense, "while consensus is no doubt necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent."⁴⁷ In totality, Mouffe thinks of disagreement as an advantageous characteristic. Alternatively, agreement—seemingly a desirable outcome—often becomes a disingenuous attempt to resolve issues that at their core may, in fact, be unresolvable with a singular unification of disparate opinions and needs.

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 174–175.

⁴⁶ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

⁴⁷ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

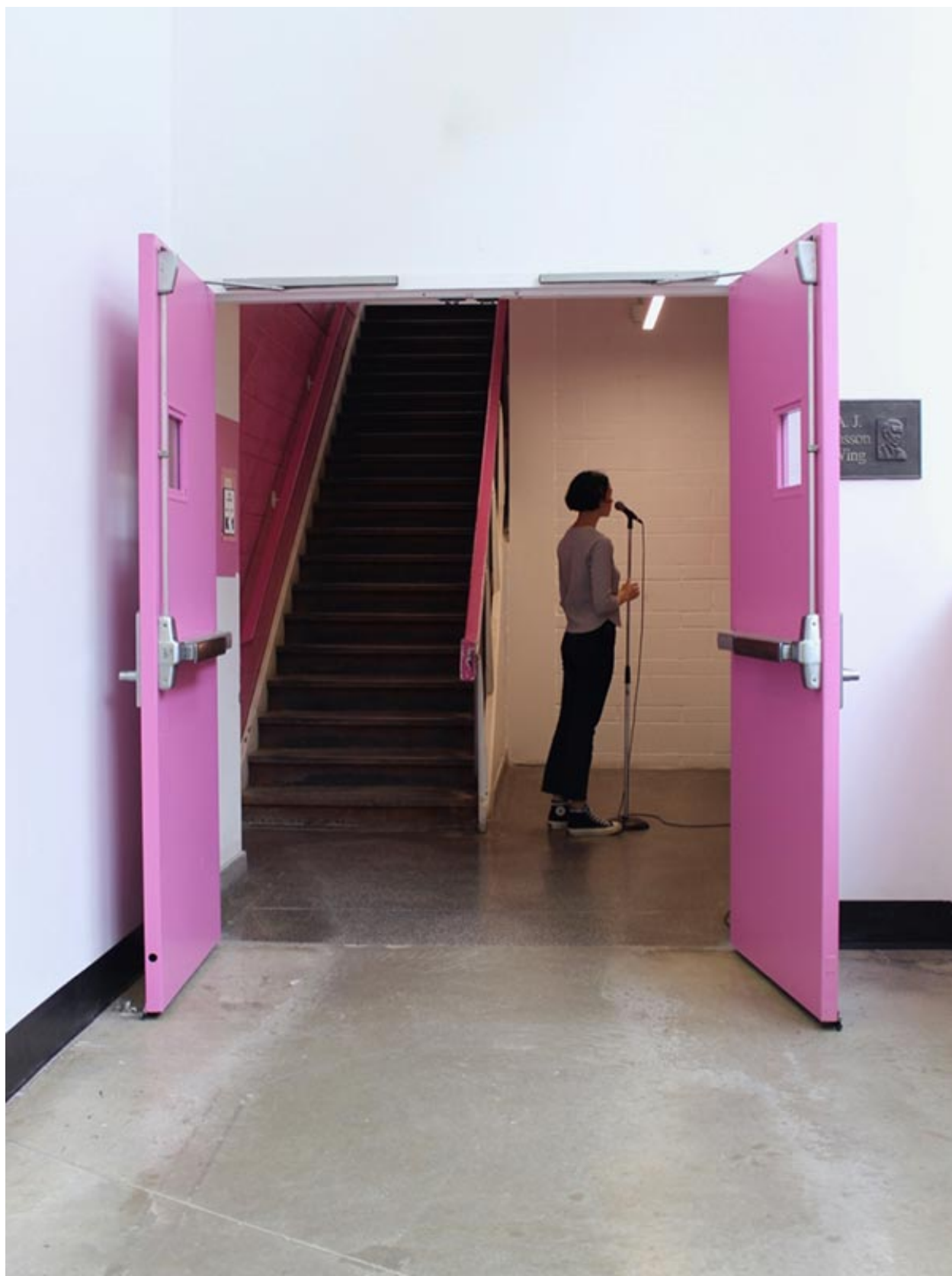


Figure 5: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (pink stairwell), 100 McCaul St, Toronto, ON, 2020.

Nothing to Hear, So to Speak

My MFA thesis exhibition— *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak*—was a site-responsive sound installation using a combination of different common spaces. In formulating the work, I was inspired greatly by the unexpected ways that audiences chose to interact with the microphone configuration I had employed in my previous work, *Refrain*. In that project, I had not expected that anyone would speak into the microphone. Rather, I planned that it would be seen and acknowledged. Then, I suspected that later—when its source could be heard—it would provide a reminder (on its subsequent viewing) about the opportunity to listen to the ambient sound (including voices) of the built environment. This logic was informed by the understanding that sound manifests itself through tactile or visual means alongside hearing. That is, sounds can be felt, or the effects of sound observed. I have found this a point of interest from my very first studio experiments. While touch can impart the vibration of sound directly, or impact the strength of transmission, it is also the case that sight provides an equally valuable toolkit for sensory crossover. Like the previous work documented in this thesis, *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* was constructed so that the sound of one space would be heard in another. In choosing the site for the work, I knew from experience over the past several projects that it was important to find a location with a considerable amount of everyday commuter traffic. In scouting for spaces, I returned to the source of the hum from chapter one; the foyer in OCAD University's main building at 100 McCaul St. As a sound installation, *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* was the most expansive project within the scope of my thesis research. It was active continuously and without interruption from March 11 until March 15, 2020. I responded to the physical layout and social usage of its location by splitting the project into two similar yet slightly varied experiences.



Figure 6: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (pink stairwell detail), 100 McCaul St, Toronto, ON, 2020.

Part one of the installation utilized a vocal microphone that was attached to a straight microphone stand with a small round base. This was placed in a ground-floor section of the pink stairwell on the north side of the entrance foyer; a transitory point where the doors remain permanently open to the main foyer space. Here, on the floor directly in front of the microphone, a vinyl text decal was applied that read *Listen in Yellow Stairwell*. Discovering both microphone and text, and following the written instructions, audiences were able to speak into it but heard no amplification or alteration of their voice. Meanwhile, in the yellow stairwell, fifteen metres away on the other side of the foyer, the signal was transferred wirelessly. Sounds were heard from a single loudspeaker positioned on a tripod stand, two metres off the ground. This central stairwell has a set of doors that need to be opened to enter or exit, so any sound was confined within its boundaries unless the door was opened.



Figure 7: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (yellow stairwell), 100 McCaul St, Toronto, ON, 2020.

Part two of the installation applied the same formula as part one; audiences “speaking” in one space then having the opportunity to hear the sound in another. In this case, a microphone in the MCA 181 corridor, situated directly south side of the entrance foyer, and the green stairwell, fifteen metres south-east of the corridor. To test out how audiences would react to some variation in the installation setup, I arranged a microphone to hang from the ceiling using its cable (replicating in part, the visual effect of *Refrain*). On the floor directly below the hanging microphone, a vinyl text decal was applied that read *Listen in Green Stairwell*. The loudspeaker in the green stairwell was installed using the same arrangement as the one in the yellow stairwell.

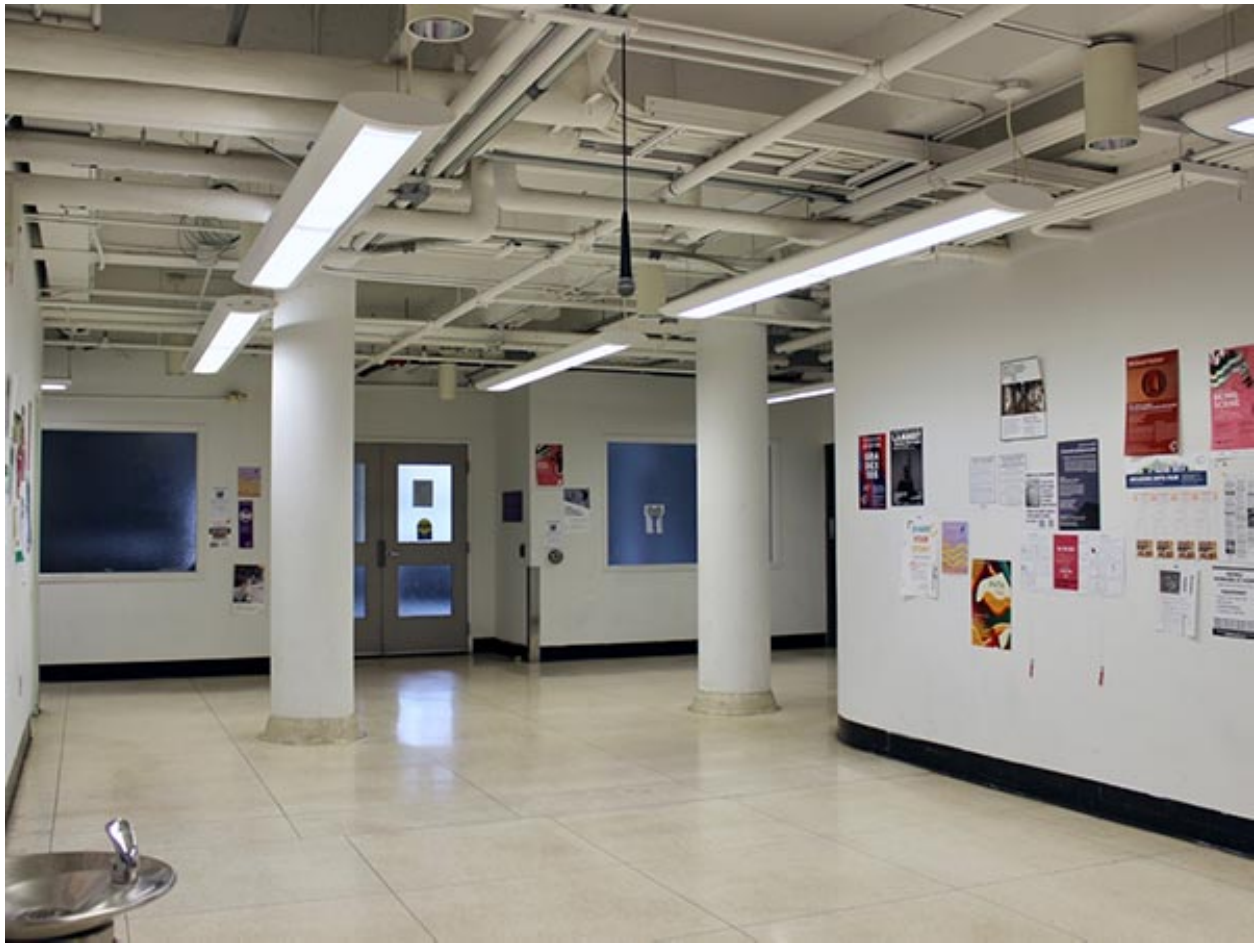


Figure 8: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (MCA181), 100 McCaul St, Toronto, ON, 2020.



Figure 9: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (MCA181 detail), 100 McCaul St, Toronto, ON, 2020.

Following Mathew Fuller and his idea of “media ecologies,” I decided to flesh out this work using only readymade objects in conjunction with text instructions. These elements, as with *Refrain*, would act as signifiers of sound—whether sound, in fact, could or could not be heard. Reflecting on *Refrain*, I felt that the radio receivers I used attracted a fair amount of attention for their design. Although not vintage devices by any means, their explicit reference to the medium of radio evokes a bygone era. In *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak*, I wanted to choose objects that would be perceived as entirely contemporary, and thus, help to ground the work with an emphasis on sensory immediacy rather than nostalgic reflection. I rented two industry standard vocal microphones (with XLR cables), a set of powered loudspeakers, and two high-definition wireless transmitter units. When installing the work, I prioritized keeping the transmitters out-of-sight by connecting the microphones directly to standard XLR cables, then running the cables into discrete areas; behind a couch in the foyer and bench in the corridor. These out-of-sight areas had power

outlets that allowed for the XLR cables to be plugged into the transmitter units that would then send the signals to their eventual destinations. I strategically positioned all other elements to seem natural yet obvious and unconventional within their respective spaces. As Fuller states, when arranged with this kind of intentionality, standard objects can “become uncanny organs by which media may be sensed.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 174.

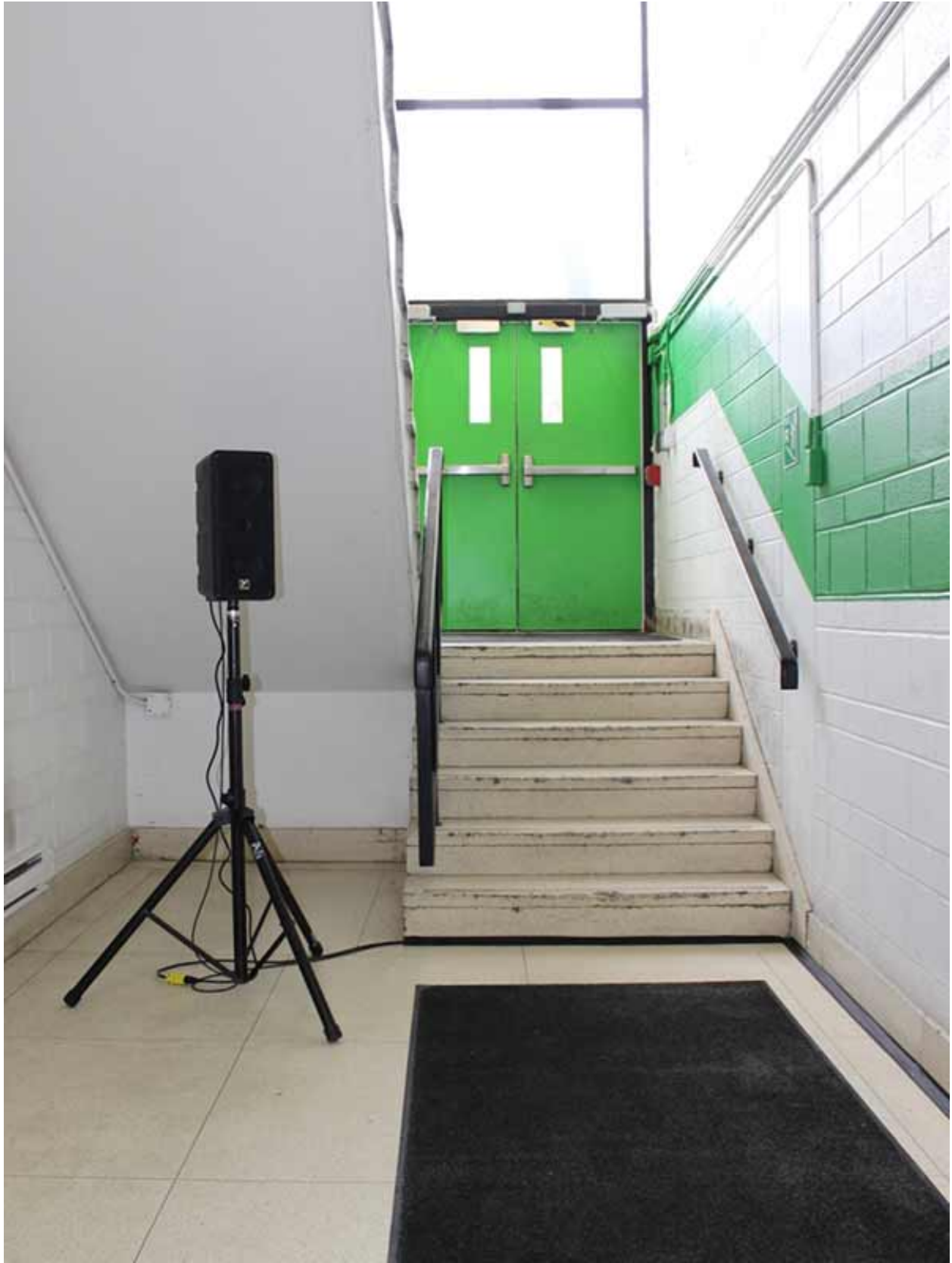


Figure 10: *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak* (green stairwell), 2020.

Whereas the pink and yellow stairwells were almost always buzzing with activity, the green stairwell was less active. I was, however, interested to use it to provide a contrast within the installation layout. On the other hand, the MCA181 corridor was perhaps the busiest area of all. It connects from the main entrance foyer to the main lecture hall; a space that houses daily classes that are attended by thousands of students. For each of the spaces selected, the choice to use high definition wireless microphone transmitters meant that the quality of the audio signal was much cleaner than any of my previous projects that used DIY transmitters. In addition, I structured the gain (loudness) of the microphones so that the ambience of the surrounding pink stairwell or MCA181 space was not accentuated. Because of this, the yellow and green stairwells seemed aurally unaltered until a sound was made very close to a microphone. This was a shift from *Refrain* where the microphone signal was boosted to be as loud as possible, and as a result, represented the ambience of the space more dramatically. In *Nothing to Hear, So to Speak*, the name says it all; there is “nothing to hear” unless some form of agency is taken to “speak.”

Over the course of the five days I spent with the installation, I observed groups of people bonding together over shared aural experiences. Sometimes, the audiences consisted of friends, but often enough, strangers talked to one another. I witnessed people discover the project across multiple days, eventually bringing back a friend on the second or third visit to make sense of each segment; singing songs, laughing, and having fun. I encountered surprised listeners stopping to catch a poem being read aloud by an unknown poet. Here, the focus on process was not just for the artist, but for the listener too. I also found that many times, although no one was intentionally listening, it did not matter to those who found joy in letting their voices echo in the stairwells; sometimes knowing this was the case, other times simply enjoying the opportunity to make sounds in a place where they would not normally.

5

Social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order.
—Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, *Breathing*

Careful Listening

In this final chapter, I will reflect on the process of discovering *how* I made the decisions discussed over the course of this thesis. That is, how all the unknowing led to the knowing. As such, this discussion of a methodological framework can be considered as not merely a way to justify actions, rather, a way of understanding my practice. The small act of discovering a hum in the foyer of OCAD University’s main building kick-started a multi-year research-creation project. Its humble existence prompted me to rethink how unassuming spaces could be restructured to support dynamic and engaged listening practices. What the hum has proved to me is that there are many busy yet quiet spaces inside of institutional buildings that, in fact, provide a perfect setting for sound installations. However, making works connect with audiences in these spaces requires a deft touch. As with most repetitive activities, expectation is a key point to consider. In my opinion, sound is a process of making—just as listening is a process of making.

Reflecting on my work from a distance, I can now understand more clearly how it is possible to leverage the materiality of sound through both invisible (aural) and tangible (visual) techniques. The tactile quality of objects has helped to connect listening to sound in ways that I otherwise could not find with sound alone. A core question that I was exploring through all my work is whether listening is enhanced or diminished through looking. What might be made of the (im)balance between sound and vision in the transitional spaces that I have been exploring? In thinking about the practices of visual and sonic expansion in the transitional spaces of my choosing, I find it useful to consider what Jonathan Sterne outlines in his audiovisual litany:

- hearing is spherical, vision is directional;
- hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective;
- sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object;
- hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces;

- hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it;
- hearing places us inside an event, seeing gives us a perspective on the event;
- hearing tends toward subjectivity, vision tends toward objectivity;
- hearing brings us into the living world, sight moves us toward atrophy and death;
- hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect;
- hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense;
- hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, vision is a sense that removes us from it.⁴⁹

An intentionally oppositional series of comparisons, this framework intends to provoke rather than resolve questions of audiovisual hierarchy. Sterne concedes his list is a point of reference, as compared to a rigid set of conclusions. I agree. It is a call to action and warning that prioritizing the aural over the visual is not the solution to any of the problems that might be at hand. In spaces that are shaped by transience, how might sound open the potential of the surrounding space, without discarding the dominance of vision? How can new kinds of hearing that develop into listening be cultivated to inform a greater awareness of social, ecological, and political issues? What might emerge from focusing attention on sonic interventions, but in the same breath, doing so without discarding the visual entirely?

Another issue that emerged in my sound installations was the acknowledgement of carefully considering where sound is coming from in comparison to where it is heard. I found that in most environments there was a diversity of spaces at my disposal. What makes a space effective for participation does not always make it effective for listening. As my work progressed, I became increasingly interested in how a separation of these two states can help to facilitate a stronger connection to each aspect. In turn, helping to deemphasize the singularity of either process of making or discerning. An influential reference point for my work in this area is the 2019 solo exhibition by artist Kevin Beasley at the Whitney Museum in New York. Specifically, a two-room installation; *A view of a landscape: A cotton gin motor*. In the first room, a functioning motor from an Alabama cotton farm (active in-situ from 1940–1973) was presented, encased in a soundproof glass box and surrounded by active microphones. The rusting machinery was switched on and running. Although one might suspect it to emit noise, nothing could be heard. Likewise, the speed of its spinning motion was so frantic, it appeared motionless. The second room was a darkened space where the sound of the engine was audible, but no significant visuality was engaged. Writing

⁴⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

about the work for Artforum, Jace Clayton speculates that these actions are in line with the displacement of specific cultures (in this case, Black America) as part of an ongoing and cautionary tale of relocation, ownership and mortality.⁵⁰ Aside from the division of space for pragmatic reasons, Beasley's subtle yet powerful gestures speak to the kind of political sensibilities outlined by Mouffe that I am continuing to refine and articulate more clearly through my own future projects.

In thinking about all of this and as a concluding point, I would like to reflect by discussing a final influence; Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*. This work—not an installation, but rather, a composite performance and recording—brings structural components of my overall practice into greater relief. Reflecting on it helps to expose a deeper connection between language and physical space, then, further clarifies desires within my own practice to overlay sounding and listening on top of selective materials and architectural parameters. Lucier's piece—like Pauline Oliveros' sonic meditations—explains and instigates a process rather than simply documenting what might come next from enacting a process. For *I am sitting in a room*, the instructions that outline the work are read out loud while the technological process they describe are simultaneously enacted:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech. I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.

As this statement is read out loud, Lucier's words are transformed into a series of indeterminate murmurs. His intention that the work will “smooth out any irregularities my speech might have” relates to his stutter accentuating certain fragments of speech unintentionally as he utters them. This stuttering drives what is heard, both in its formative presence, and in that it remains a defiant and definitive characteristic of the sonic texture even as the process of reproduction begins to mask where it may have occurred. As Lucier's process continues, what is heard is each word blurring into the next until there is no distinct clarity between individual fragments of speech. It is a case

⁵⁰ Jace Clayton, “Breaking Point.” *Artforum*, March, 2019.

of a copy of a copy of a copy, and so on. And yet in another sense, it is also about the performance of disability and through a small act of defiance, the opportunity for liberation through erasure.⁵¹

After several minutes of this process of change playing out—over a series of cycles that Lucier calls “generations”—it is no longer apparent that the human voice (let alone an “imperfect” one) or even language itself is involved in the making of the work. This is the sound of semantic value dissolving into physical space. Discussing the creation of the work, Lucier acknowledges he operated against normative recording procedures, prevalent at the time and in effect to the present day:

It’s funny because if I had consulted an engineer, he or she would probably have found a way to get the end result in one process... but I was interested in the process, the step-by-step, slow process of the disintegration of the speech and the reinforcement of the resonant frequencies.⁵²

Lucier’s assertion is that the process of the work equates to “a form of amplification by repetition.”⁵³ And this—one of the many threads the work undoes—is a key factor that I would like to linger on in perpetuity; the idea and importance of *process over outcome*. In having reached this juncture—a somewhat similar point to where things began with the hum—where to conclude for now? Through what has passed, I have found that all sonic relationships are composed of multiple points of access, sustained by differing perspectives and expanded by diverse approaches towards listening. So, it seems to be that in furthering this, the main question I must ask is: where to listen next, and with whom?

⁵¹ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 189–192.

⁵² Alvin Lucier, Interview by Douglas Simon, *Chambers* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 33–34.

⁵³ Lucier, *Chambers*, 35.

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