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## Relational Listening P.S. BY BILL DIETZ & LAWRENCE ENGLISH

On Sun, Mar 8, 2015 at 6:49 PM, Bill Dietz wrote:

Dear Lawrence,

There's something about the conspicuous absence of artists in your text that helps me hone in on what at first was little more than a vague feeling of uncertainty around your exciting text.

The point is not to name-drop or to join in on the recitation of a hagiographic mantra, but to more specifically position this discussion historically, and also, perhaps, to undo or at least complicate some of the tidy distinctions that pop up in the text?

Put another way, I'm uncertain about the agentive horizon of relational listening as you formulate it.

Isn't the strength of the Cagean intervention vis-à-vis Western European music history premised on its break with given, absolutely elaborated practices of listening? Doesn't ignoring or playing down that perhaps largely unspoken (but no less discursive) history of listening (that of "classical" listening) come dangerously close to the territory of Jonathan Sterne's "audio-visual litany?"

Doesn't Peter Ablinger teach us that "hearing everything" (as microphone, ear, anything else) is always a fantasy, a fiction? Wouldn't this suggest instead that the importance of the microphone is not in its supposed "objectivity" (compare recordings from any two microphones and that idea evaporates) but in its exemplary redistribution of the sensible, its demonstration of other "mixes" between signal and noise?

Doesn't Maryanne Amacher remind us that the "organic ear" is also always already a prosthetic? And isn't that "organic" prosthetic, as a sedimentation (a history!) of normalized entanglements, also already political, even ideological?

I don't write any of this to exclude the possibility of listeners' agency. On the contrary, in so far as your "relational listening" is indeed in excess of Chion et

al, I'm all for it! But isn't the mediation between what you refer to as the organic and the prosthetic, the regulation of the slippage (blurring) between, precisely the site of epistemic negotiation? Wouldn't this have to be our starting point in rethinking the potential of listening to listening - an eminently (ontologically??) political potential which could then only be "heard" as inseparably entangled with other paradigmatic constrictions of subjecthood?

Warmly from unusually warm Berlin,

Bill

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On Wed, Mar 11, 2015 at 9:47 AM, LAWRENCE ENGLISH wrote:

Dear Bill

Thanks kindly for your letter. I read it with great interest.

Firstly, I must confess I do ascribe to the possibility for agency in listening. More broadly, I feel strongly about the possibilities of agency in the realm of human experience. I think to refute agency, albeit a position framed by our limited physiological and psychological capabilities, is to deny our capacity and capability to, as Bernstein summarized so well, *think the unthinkable*. Sense is the input into that thinking process and the pursuit of a creative engagement with the world requires an agentive position, one that facilitates, for example, a refusal of rationality in favor of other readings and interpretations.

This belief comes very much from a subjective position, one informed by my practices. It also takes root amongst the more recent theories of listening, which I feel seek to push beyond the established arguments around how we understand the processes of perception. I draw a distinction between the functional perception of hearing and the psychological piercing of listening. I feel listening goes beyond the simple intake of information into a consciously directed and in some senses compositional exercise where focus and interest are placed according to the preoccupations of the artist. This placement of interest results in a framing which ultimately leads to the creation of 'a space' within 'the space,' to borrow from Giancarlo Tonutti.

I agree there is nothing absolute about our capacity for listening and I feel in fact that this works to our advantage. Thinking of sound within Morton's frame of the hyperobject, in its widest sense, we simply can't effectively comprehend an absolute engagement within any given sound field, rather we must consider ourselves as agents within a horizon of listening and from within that horizon we participate in, cultivate, and then seek to transmit our listening.

Speaking directly to the notion of 'hearing everything,' I often touch on Douglas Kahn's provocation here about Edison's experiences with the phonograph. I feel Kahn offers this as a metaphor rather than a literalism. What I think the metaphor speaks to, is a failure of technology to adequately share in the agentive listening that takes place within us. This metaphor offers us a point for contemplation about our own audition, a moment of friction that might ignite our sense of ourselves beyond the confines of our aural interiority. This external aural intake, through what I like to think of as the prosthetic ear of the microphone, reminds us of the mechanisms of the mind and of our biological selves. The ear, like the microphone has an inbuilt set of qualifications, its ability to perceive certain frequencies, and, as you rightly note, its potential to 'self-oscillate' and output oto-acoustic phenomenon.

I've developed this theory of relational listening as a means of addressing what I sense as a rather serious lack in the analysis of listening beyond the functional realm of perception. Szendy's *Listening* offers us as artists an opportunity to reconsider how we approach listening. Furthermore, how, at the root of our sonic experiences, this key aspect might be more rigorously investigated. The *listener's listening* and the desire to transmit that unique listening are utterly foundational if we are going to build a more considered position for a whole range of practices in the sonic arts, for example field recording. How we consider, compress, reshape, and from a creative perspective, ultimately expel those elemental materials through various means is something we must investigate further. It's as though we are now just starting to extract listening from the muteness of functionality.

My best from Adelaide.  
cheers

+Lawrence

On Mon, Mar 16, 2015 at 4:15 PM, Bill Dietz wrote:

Dear Lawrence,

First I think I should emphasize even more strongly that my message was sent in the spirit of a deep but, let's say, dissensual agreement!

For years, my own efforts have been almost exclusively devoted to forms of listening that might help us think (and 'feel' - I add that only for the sake of a likely unnecessary explicitness in so far as the profound entanglement or jumble of such simple dualisms is of course my point!) the unthinkable precisely beyond the hegemony of the supposedly mere physiological or functional.

For me, to make the move away from the automatisms and reductions of complexity that those standard notions of hearing and listening imply means also recognizing just how deeply those notions remain embedded within our "selves." This is why before I can even begin thinking about a microphone or field recording, I feel I must to the best of my ability understand my own constitution as a subject. Which is messy. Which seems to be a kind of thicket of relations. Of outsides within me. So that a move into something other than this morass of received perceptions and conceptions, the possibility of agency, hinges on a fragile, emergent moment. A moment when all those given relations in their complexity might slip into something indeterminate, into something...new.

Perhaps our divergence is not unlike [my initial response](#) to Szendy's book. Or, as I've quoted John Miller [before](#) (he's writing about country music): "Only by admitting the arena of commodity circulation [...] do we begin to move away from it."

I guess what I'm saying is that we are always already relational before we attempt to take up something like a self-consciously relational listening, regardless of our awareness of this. And for me, starting from this assumption, that "I is an other" (and a particular 'one' at that - sexually, culturally, economically), might then lead to a different form of production than a position which insists on a form of foundational agency? That agency is something to be taken up, struggled for, contested?

Maybe we're splitting hairs.  
All my best,

Bill

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On Tue, Apr 21, 2015 at 11:15 AM, LAWRENCE ENGLISH wrote:

Dear Bill

thanks kindly for your letter.

To *feel the unthinkable* is a lovely aspiration for all artists and thinkers.

I could not agree more that from the outset we maintain an embedded internal relational state as listeners. To me, this is perhaps unspoken (maybe it shouldn't be?). Our abilities to conceive a listening or moreover contemplate that listening, within personal and philosophical contexts, are entirely relational to those always growing nets of socio-cultural/political/economic detritus we lumber ourselves with. The agency required to recognize and then critical analyze this position is foundational indeed and for any artist/intellectual, I'd argue utterly inseparable from the pursuits of theory and practice.

I think the reason I have built this organic/prosthetic relational listening framework, as it currently exists, is to perhaps try to add focus to some of these questions, relate them directly to an artistic practice to which I feel I may speak (or whisper) to, selfish as that might be. I hope that through this process we can begin to encourage an excess or agitation that might serve to erode those pillars of 20th century thought as it pertains to listening.

With respect the "Composing Listening" article, I think we're both in agreement, that we are at a point of auditory awakening. We've woken to a delta of possibility, across which the meandering streams of 19th and 20th century listening scholarship might meet, combine, connect and eventually be reborn, offering new oceans of investigation. Oceans of varied pressure, of differing strata and of rich complexity. I feel we're now only just beginning to see the streams of thought making their way into this delta. The ocean is perhaps just a theoretical potential, it's our duty channel what has come

before us and add more weight. It's our duty to realize this ocean of possibility.

On a parallel note, I wonder if the historical discourses that surround our more physiological readings of sense have reduced our capacity to allow those experiences to transcend. As unpopular as the notion might be, I believe that in a world so heavily reliant on the rational, we've forgotten to at least imagine the irrational, the magical, and perhaps even the unattainable. One of my true interests (and pleasures), albeit somewhat removed our relational listening, is exploring that point at which the listening of the body under sound pressure transgresses the sense of audition into a sensation of touch. That synesthetic nexus is a constant aim for me in concert.

Maybe we are splitting hairs, but it's what lies within the follicle that we need to be exploring. I say split away!

cheers

+lawrence