

EAR | WAVE | EVENT

Issue Two
Spring 2015
earwaveevent.org

Sound, Listening, and Public Engagement

BY BRENDA HUTCHINSON

1.

***Socially engaged art reflects 'an interest in producing effects and affect in the world rather than focusing on the form itself.'*¹**

Like air, one of sound's broadest and most powerful qualities is its availability to everyone in the world. Sound as a physically perceived, vibratory medium offers the potential of a unifying connection among all beings. It is democratization through availability. Listening is the key to this shared awareness and the omnipresence of sound provides a constant opportunity to practice listening for everyone. In her book *Software for People*, Pauline Oliveros elegantly describes the relationship between attention and awareness and their relationship to sound and the self.² Using a simple drawing of a circle surrounding a small dot in its center, Oliveros invites one to imagine oneself in the center. The dot represents attention and the circle represents awareness and one is to pay attention to both. She offers this as both a score for performance, and as an explanation for the type of focus required for her Deep Listening practice.³

As it currently stands, "Socially Engaged Art" is predominantly an extended practice of visual artists. And though focus on the relational is central to this practice, the production of tangible evidence in the form of an object remains

¹ From Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: the MIT Press, 2012), p. 32.

² Pauline Oliveros. *Software For People: Collected Writings 1963-1980* (Smith Publications, 1983), p. 140.

³ Pauline Oliveros. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (Deep Listening Publications: iUniverse Books, 2005) p. xxi.

important.⁴ The dichotomy of artist/observer, even artist/invited participant, is preserved. Likewise, the traditional model of music-making often maintains a hierarchy of roles and functions, automatically generating notions of one who originates, one who performs, one who receives. As a practice of socially engaged art through sound evolves, perhaps others will analyze, critique, and deconstruct the already established, historical forms of artistic practice in relation to this.

The common thread and basis of my publicly engaged practice is experiential, strongly predicated on working with sound as a musician. This is not to say that one needs to be a musician to work in this way, but it has made it possible for me because of my training in listening to sound as a musician and my lifelong practice as a performing musician engaged with sound as an immersive, physical, experiential medium.

My proposal is to insert the idea of experiential practice into socially engaged art, defining and discussing it as it relates to the medium of sound and the development of work through listening. I would like to offer a perspective on interacting with the public (primarily non-artists) in non-gallery or performance venues (i.e. in shared public spaces like parks, streets, and parking lots). These interactions focus on intimate reciprocal engagement through listening and sounding. Through these experiences with the ephemeral, time-based medium of sound, people may understand something about interacting with others that's possible only in this way, leading to previously unconsidered conceptual, aesthetic, and relational possibilities.

2. **Background**

My early work was a studio practice of publicly engaging with individuals (mostly strangers) through storytelling and recording. I gathered material through public interaction then returned to my studio where I worked on

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud maintains the importance and function of creating objects as part of the artist's function within the context of relational aesthetics. *"The artist's practice, and his behavior as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people, by way of aesthetic objects."* (from the 2002 English translation of *Relational Aesthetics*, p.42).

ways to present the stories and the quality of my experiences to a larger audience. My ultimate goal was to share what I had heard and experienced with an audience not present during the original encounters and presentations. Eventually, the focus of my work shifted from the sounds, recordings and presentations of the encounters to focus on the actual encounters themselves. (See side bar)

As anyone who has ever listened to a recording they have made will tell you, the microphone picks up everything. The mic has no brain, and barring different microphone specifications, will return a listening experience that is "objective" and which often does not match the one heard or remembered by the person making the recording. What we pay attention to colors our memory of what we have heard. As the person who records, you are paying attention to technical issues. You are also participating in the event as a performer or witness - you wear several hats. Except while setting up and operating the necessary equipment, you are unlikely to be particularly objective. If you are paying attention, there is no such thing as a passive observer or listener.

Perhaps it has to do with my first experience with recording people. My grandmother was in the early stages of dementia when I decided to capture her stories while they were still recognizable. I set up the technical controls, which would objectively record her voice, the sounds in the rooms, the others who popped in and out, everything. Although I love sounds in the abstract for all their intrinsic qualities, when it comes to recording voices, my fascination with abstract sound is largely overridden. In recording my grandmother I was less interested in the qualities of her voice

How Do You Get To Carnegie Hall? was a pivotal piece in many ways. I had been asked to compose a piece for piano. Because it had been a very long time since I had any interest in writing notes, I remember asking myself what kind of piece I would like to do. Of course it had everything to do with listening to people tell their stories about the piano and to hearing them perform.

So I loaded up my piano and set out with a truck (donated by U-Haul) on a 6500-mile journey meandering across the country for 5 weeks and asked people to do just that. At least that was my initial intention.

Unfortunately most people said, "No," or, "No, thank you I'm OK," to my offer, "Would you like to play my piano?" I realized after several hundred miles that unless I could entice people to stop and play the piano, I would have no recordings and no piece.

As surprising and frustrating as it was to be rejected over and over again, I loved and embraced this new challenge. How does one create a safe and inviting place where people overcome their social instincts long enough to actually see for themselves what is happening and then decide whether or not they want to participate based on an accurate assessment of the situation?

and speaking patterns than I was in capturing the content of her stories and in conveying her intention and quality of memory as she recounted her stories. Even more looming was the urgency to preserve our connection through these stories, which I had heard for years and which were now in the process of changing because of her dementia.

Since the work I did with my Grandmother, I have felt compelled to honor a number of conditions regarding the people I have had the privilege of recording. When a person agrees to be recorded, I take it as a matter of trust that I will present a version of the content expressed by the storyteller in accordance with the intention in which it was told. I regard the relationship with the person I am recording as fundamentally important. This means that I don't use their voice or utterances as abstract or objective material for something that interests only me. Rather my goal is to understand the person's intention, meaning, and whatever else may be important to them and then work to crystallize and share whatever that is with others. As impossible as it is to get out of the way, that is what I try to do— not to use the recordings to tell my story, but to provide a window, context, and opportunity for others to experience what I did.

For the same reasons that I am reluctant to objectify the sounds of human utterance and storytelling, I eschew surreptitious recording. If honoring the transaction of the relationship is the most basic aspect of the work, it follows that consent is critical. Once one adopts the view that permission is required in order to record someone, it significantly changes the parameters and nature of the interaction one has with others as well. One reason many people give for making candid photos or recordings is that they prefer unselfconscious behavior, claiming it to be more natural and more desirable than something staged or posed. Another reason given is fear of content being withheld or censored if they were to ask permission to record whatever was happening in the moment.

I believe the main reason someone doesn't ask for permission when coming face to face with others, is that he or she must then negotiate with them directly. This can be terrifying to contemplate, especially with regard to people you don't know. Suddenly the relationship is central and you don't know what is going to happen. All that follows depends on the interaction and the development of the relationship through speaking and listening, word, and gesture. Although these interactions may be a form of play or

improvisation, they are not so easily categorized as art or performance. Ultimately, they are based on a shared reality that is not about art or performance, but human interaction.

3.

Every artist whose work stems from relational aesthetics has a world of forms, a set of problems and a trajectory which are all his own. What they do share together is much more decisive, to wit, the fact of operating within one and the same practical and theoretical horizon: the sphere of inter-human relations.⁵

I would like to emphasize the importance of the experiential and relational aspects of this practice with regard to the medium of sound. I suggest that the focus on the interpersonal relationship itself is not the means, but the end. The goal of the act is to develop intimacy and openness among people. Working with strangers in public space as target and audience, performers and subjects through sound is a means to experience these relational possibilities.

While perhaps redundant to note, it is important to remind ourselves that experiential work requires the experience. The directive to pay attention to the present moment has its roots in many meditative practices, including Buddhist forms. The spiritual benefits of this practice have a long and well-documented history. If instead of the omnipresent breath, we direct our attention to the present moment by listening, we may share other practical benefits as well. One advantage resulting from this close focus on sound is that we can become virtuoso perceivers of ephemeral details.

Indeed once cultivated, the ability to notice and respond to fleeting temporal changes and relationships may be applied to anything - including interactions with others. And while the concept of listening to time may seem esoteric, the activity itself is accessible, practical, and leaves an embodied residue that lingers. It's one thing to talk about and conceptually understand the impact of an activity, but another thing entirely to engage as an essential participant. There is no substitute for physical embodiment or for engaging with present

⁵ Ibid. p.43

reality when it comes to the first-hand experience with this participatory work.

Listened to in an objective way, sound is inherently non-representational. This non-representational aspect of sound occupies a place in the physical world as an observable reality. Sound's physical connection to reality affords a special opportunity to interact with anyone in a shared reality that is not theater, performance, symbolic, or conceptual but rather a familiar "everyday" public space or situation.

Unlike visual media, the perception of sound does not necessarily depend on physically directed attention.⁶ If we don't want to see something, we simply close our eyes. Since we have no earflaps, if don't want to hear something, we usually exclude the sound we wish to minimize by "tuning it out." In other words, we use our attention to suppress our awareness of the offending sound. On the other hand, if there is something we want to see more clearly, we physically move our heads and/or eyes in order to examine more closely that which has attracted our attention. In the immersive world of sound, if we want to zoom in on a sound, we direct our attention. As soon as we do this, we are immediately engaged with the present. What we become conscious of and ascribe meaning to depends upon our awareness of sound in the present moment.

Sound also has an inextricable relationship to memory. The ephemeral, time-based nature of the medium requires memory to construct coherence from the stream of present sound. For instance, we can speak about how memory functions neurologically. We can also examine memory for its associative and emotional qualities, its role in perception and communication and with

⁶ Hearing and listening engage the brain in ways that are different from seeing and looking. There is a growing body of evidence in a wide range of investigations engaged with the subject. See, for instance, the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) at Stanford University, their weekly Hearing Seminar on cutting edge research presented by current researchers in the field. Open to the general public, its schedule of upcoming events can be found at <https://ccrma.stanford.edu>. Moreover as technology for the measurement of brain activity has become more sensitive, it has become possible to examine more subtle activity and to pose a greater variety of questions about how the brain behaves under various circumstances. Relevant work about sound and listening has extended from collaborations between scientists and doctors to include musicians, philosophers, psychiatrists, and even religious figures.

respect to our connection with others and to our own histories and construction of present reality. This invocation of memory through the act of listening confers a special status to sound as a medium and to its role in interacting with others in socially engaged work.

The underlying spirit of such sonically and socially conscious work is invitational and inclusive. The focus is largely on the relationships and connections that are formed when engaged with sound. The medium of sound by its very nature dissolves the boundaries between sounding and receiving object. The movement of air and the transmission of vibrations over time are invisible, yet directly experienced, uniting the vibrating object with vibrating ears and skin. This interdependence complicates many conceptual boundaries as well. What is meaningful (i.e. connections and relationships, improvisation and play) is largely abstract. The forms created by these interactions are time based, ephemeral and exist only in memory.

Part of the legacy of the post-Cage world is that we are free to move in many directions, especially with regard to sound. We learned with Cage to listen and appreciate sound and objects for their inherent and abstract qualities. In his book, *In the Blink of an Ear*, Seth Kim-Cohen invites us to consider the concept of non-cochlear sound art. He offers particular ways of reassessing and embracing "extra-musical" aspects of sound, including associations with objects that produce sound as well as their connections to memory, aesthetics, identity, culture and politics. In his discussion of Robert Morris' *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, Kim-Cohen goes on to say: "*Time, in turn, introduces history, which introduces the additionally expanded situation of culture: of sociality, politics, gender, class and race.*"⁷

Pushing even further to this end, I would like to suggest that an even closer examination and experiential relationship with sound itself (yes, especially the cochlear type) expands what is possible in the realm of direct social engagement by focusing on time and perceptible time-based relationships. These relationships (and the recognition of them) can create and occupy an area of mutual, shared recognition and an improvisatory field of interaction. My hope is that a discussion about working with sound as the medium and listening as the primary form of perceptual discernment can thus expand the

⁷ Seth Kim-Cohen. *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York, London, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2009), p.59.

conversation and scope of what is possible with post-Cagean socially engaged work.

4.

Listening engages with sound in the present moment. Thinking engages with thought in the present moment.

In addition to some of the basic sonic parameters (i.e. pitch, timbre, location) we listen to and discuss, I would like to draw attention to the possibilities of what an even closer examination of sound with regard to temporality will yield. This is especially relevant with regard to relationships in general and as such to experiential practice in particular. To proceed beyond the appreciation of sounds *for their abstract sonic qualities* we must further embrace everything about the physical, immersive, and time-based nature of the medium itself. This includes but is not limited to “extra-musical” associations (i.e. social, stories, and function). When paying very close attention to sound (through training and practice), one can discern another dimension of non-sonic, but by no means “extra-musical,” relationships. These relationships absolutely depend on sound and listening but they are time-based rather than auditory. Furthermore, these time-based relationships exist independently through the engagement of memory. These relationships include both abstract forms (melody, counterpoint, formal structure, etc.) as well as situational, conceptual, and emotional associations. I regard all these fleeting relationships of form and the significance to the listener as the non-sonic aspects of sound.

Musicians are well trained to perceive the minute changes in sound that occur over time. We have been attuned to the nuances of tempo and drilled to discern pitch and those relationships in terms of melody and harmony (both of which rely on memory). Timbre presents an even more complex set of sonic relationships which musicians are trained to hear and understand. Vibrations too fast for us to perceive directly create phase relationships. However, we know their effect through our ability to locate sounds and to hear different acoustic spaces. Let me say this again - these are all sonic considerations and are perceived through listening.

The act of zooming into the minutia of sound leads one to encounter and experience the temporal relationships which are inseparable from the

vibrating, physical sensation we usually refer to when speaking of the aural components sound. There obviously could be no sound without *time*. The zooming-in on sonic properties like pitch, loudness, timbre and location always also confronts and reveals a temporal component. Once recognized and observed as such, time and the forms generated in memory are as inescapable as they are an intrinsic part of the listening process. This embodied insight also opens up an exciting world of possibilities regarding broader non-sonic or temporal relationships that remain invisible, largely unconsidered, and unconsciously perceived in listening.

These temporal relationships have in themselves the potential for and can be subject to the same creative exploration, manipulation and improvisation as the first order parameters of consideration that have been historically applied to the typical heard-with-the-ears (cochlear) aspects of sound and music. However, the important and fundamental distinction that this strategy demands with regard to more “conceptually” or “non-cochlearly” oriented projects of socially engaged work is that one pay very close attention to the acoustic and physical properties of sound as a listening subject. It requires the conscious apprehension of the inextricably temporal aspects of sound, and it is key. Key, but also transposable: these skills may be transferred to any other time-based relational observation (i.e. the rhythm of traffic flow or blinking taillights, the movement of moon and its trajectory). Of particular relevance to experiential practice are those observational skills related to human interaction like gestures, body language, movement and even touch.

5.

Social practice...democratizes the construct, making the artist into an individual...whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity⁸

Working with sound and recording as a composer and performer have most influenced the trajectory of my work with time-based, invitational works of performance and interaction, as well as the theoretical framework I’ve been trying to articulate. I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge my deep gratitude to and strong sense of affinity with the work of early Feminist

⁸ Pablo Helguera. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), p.3.

performance artists as well. I find the following qualities of such work particularly germane to my position.

- The invitational nature of the work
- The fact that the interaction(s) are based with and in a conventional sense of a shared reality⁹
- The participation of the non-performing, general public as essential to the development and successful execution of the work. The inclusion of “non-artists” in the creation and production of the work is indispensable. It expands the scope and quality of this type of engagement and critical discussion. It is especially so with respect to ideas of growth and social change through the promotion of intimacy, personal connection and awareness of our relationship to each other and to the natural world.
- The intimacy of interaction: Listening is intimate. When considering the unamplified voice, it requires proximity. We need to be physically close to one another in order to hear and be heard. It is personal.



Consciously inserting myself into intimate interaction with strangers is central to my practice. I do this as an artist to explore questions of relation: intimacy, connection, communication, shared space. I am willing to “go first,” - all the while, inviting and expecting others to participate.

These interactions are based on my desire to explore and draw attention to the importance of the quality of the engagement itself. I believe in the power of transformation and that once something is experienced, it cannot be erased.

My practice is based on the belief that most people would prefer to live in a world where we are recognized and heard. Common ground for all beings is rare. Sound offers such an opportunity. It is also ubiquitous, free of charge and free from the possibility of restriction. Listening as a means of shared awareness and sound as the medium of opportunity for direct engagement with strangers are within the grasp and conscious volition of everyone.

⁹ Two artists whose work clearly illustrates the type of “shared reality” I identify with and strive to maintain as the central performative space in my own work are Mierle Ukeles and Barbara Ehrenreich. Continuing to act upon her *Sanitation Manifesto* (1969), when Mierle Ukeles was out there scrubbing the SOHO sidewalks in the early 70’s, there is no doubt that her actions were both gesture and performance. Yet at the same time, it was a way to draw attention and initiate the part of that project that was grounded in a non-performative, shared reality with the public. People offered her cleaning supplies and assistance. She also normalized the maintenance issue by meeting with, talking to and shaking hands with the sanitation workers—doing the “normal” things—which people do when they relate to one another. These actions were not with other artists or a larger audience, but directly with the people responsible for the work. And at least for those moments, the work was about those individuals, and the relationship with each of them was central and important. Those are the things that I relate to and respond to and feel especially indebted to Mierle Ukeles for. When Barbara Ehrenreich talks about working minimum wage jobs in her book, *Nickel and Dime*, she emphasizes that she is not playing at being a waitress or pretending to be one: *There’s no way, for example, to pretend to be a waitress: the food either gets to the table or not. People knew me as a waitress, a cleaning person, a nursing home aide, or a retail clerk not because I acted like one but because that’s what I was, at least for the time I was with them.*

Brenda Hutchinson was born in Trenton, New Jersey and is a composer and sound artist whose work has been presented at international festivals in New Zealand, Europe, Latin America and Canada. Venues in the United States include the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, Lincoln Center, Merkin Concert Hall, The Stone and The Kitchen in New York and New LangtonArts, The Lab and The Exploratorium in San Francisco. Through her work with large-scale experiments in socially based improvisations and interactions, Brenda has developed a body of work based on a perspective about interacting with the public and non-artists through personal, reciprocal engagement with listening and sounding. Brenda has also spent the past 2 decades singing into a 9 1/2 foot tube and has designed a gestural interface for the Long Tube and MAX/MSP. Recently, she developed a sound initiated drawing interface and assistive device to work with memory and cognitive impairment and has released an app version called Soundrawing. She has produced work for National Public Radio's Soundprint and is the recipient of: Gracie Allen Award from American Women in Radio and Television, Ucross Residency Award and Montalvo Artist Residency. She has received commissions from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Meet the Composer/Reader's Digest, National Endowment for the Arts, and McKnight Foundation, among others. Brenda has been an artist in residence at San Quentin Prison, Headlands Center for the Arts, Harvestworks, The Exploratorium and Djerassi Resident Artists Program. Recordings of her work are available through TELLUS, DEEP LISTENING, THE AERIAL, O.O. DISCS, FROG PEAK MUSIC and Leonardo Music Magazine. <http://www.sonicportraits.org/>