

Listening Art

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Sonic artists and listeners to sonic artworks tend to take for granted that how a listener listens to a sonic artwork affects what that listener perceives that sonic artwork to be, through the listener's inclusion, exclusion, and interpretation of the sonic events that constitute a given artwork. This tendency leaves the act of perception un-theorised in the production of sonic artworks, and unquestioned in their reception by listeners. This project has sought to address this problem by investigating making sonic artworks that take as their primary concern *criticality of listening* on the part of artists and listeners. Its aim has been to structure sonic artworks around critical discourses on listening, and for those artworks to foster critical reflection on listening by listeners.

The artworks use organized sound to engender particular types of listening, with the aim of doing so in such a way as to stimulate awareness of certain aspects of listening. As the *listener's experience* is so integral to the artist's conception of the artworks, this essay avoids describing each work's specific intent, in an effort to avoid influencing the *listener's experience* of each work unduly. Rather descriptions of each works' intent may be found in the accompanying exhibition program, which should be read *after* listening to the works. This essay focuses on giving a brief overview of the project's core concepts, methodology, and outcomes.

The central concept of this project – listening – is a complex and difficult one to define. Communications theorists (Bostrom, 1990, Glenn, 1989, Bodie et al., 2008, Janusik, 2007), psychologists (Fastl et al., 2007, Handel, 1989), cognitive neuroscientists (Schnupp et al., 2011, Peretz and Zatorre, 2003, Handel, 2006), philosophers (Ihde, 2007, Nancy, 2007, Corradi Fiumara, 1990), cultural theorists (Adorno, 1973, Small, 1998, Attali, 1985), ethnomusicologists (Howes, 2005, Reck and Reck, 1997), and sonic art theorists (Voegelin, 2010, Oliveros, 2005, Wishart, 1996, LaBelle, 2006) have all worked at defining and exploring the experiences and acts referred to by the term listening, with divergent although intersecting results. By reviewing the literature across these fields I observed that the majority of listening researchers have focused not on listening in general, but each on a variation of the listening act directed at a specific type of object. For example, communications theorists researched the act of listening-to-language, cultural theorists researched the act of listening-to-music, and they each understood listening in a way defined by the listener-object relationship under their observation – to continue the example, in terms of information comprehension and retention with listening-to-language, and in terms of the skills, knowledge, and acculturation needed for listening-to-music. From this observation I inferred that listening-in-general must encompass the sum total of these variations, and that a more thorough understanding of listening-in-general may be attained through the exploration of the relationships between its variations.

My method for structuring the artworks around critical discourses on listening has been to use the framing and re-framing of sound to elicit and contrast these variations of listening-to sound. This method is based in a rationale by which I argue that the act of listening may be used to critique itself – conduct an *immanent critique* – by leading a listener to simultaneously entertain multiple sets of standards of evaluation – *schemata* of types of listening-to sound – for the same object of listening (Sonderegger and Boer, 2011, Rumelhart, 1980). These competing schemata should conflict and cause alteration to themselves and their governing set of standards – the schema of listening-in-general – theoretically altering a listener’s conception of listening through an experience that juxtaposes listening’s variations.

My method for determining whether the artworks do foster critical reflection on listening has been based on a variation of that outlined in Clark Moustakas’ *Heuristic Research* (1990), a research methodology that emphasizes investigation of phenomena *as experienced*. I have used this modified heuristic method to test the works’ efficacy: in stimulating the *intended structure* of the experience as a sequence of intended *types of listening-to* the sonic content; in evoking general critical reflection on listening; and in evoking reflection on listening matching the intended sentiment and themes of critique of each work. The testing was carried out with a group of eleven participants, who were shown draft versions of the artworks in a one-on-one setting with the artist, and interviewed on their experiences after listening to each work. Analysis of the interview responses produced the results of the tests of the works’ efficacy, and these results were used to inform the refinement and completion of the works as presented in this exhibition.

The results of the analysis of participant responses demonstrated that the works *did* reliably stimulate general critical reflection on listening in most participants’ responses. This conclusion was ascertained from the participants’ responses to the initial question of each interview, which asked for the participant to define the term listening; the majority of responses contained critical reflection on listening that changed in emphasis from piece to piece, and reflected their present understanding of listening in light of the piece just listened to. The results of the analysis also demonstrated that in the majority of cases the works *did* evoke experiences containing the intended types of listening-to sound following the intended structure of events, although the reproducibility of the intended structure and listening types varied from piece to piece. In addition, the results demonstrated that overall the artworks *did not* reliably stimulate reflection on listening that exactly matched the artist’s intended sentiment, although they *did* evoke discussion including the works’ intended themes with relative reliability. By all of these measures *Sound, proof* (Robinson, 2014d) proved the most consistent in achieving its intent, and *Over bear* (Robinson, 2014c) the least. These conclusions were ascertained from responses to a group of questions asking participants to describe their general experience of each piece, *what* they were listening to during the piece, and *how* or in *what way* they were listening.

The refinements made to the artworks from their draft versions to those presented in this exhibition are generally minor; the most dramatic alteration to the works overall is

their placement in the less intimate context of a gallery. *I'm here to listen* (Robinson, 2014a) is virtually unchanged, as is *Sound, proof* (Robinson, 2014d). *Memory walk* (Robinson, 2014b) has been revised to accommodate its site specificity, while *Over hear* (Robinson, 2014c) has had the most significant revision – a rearrangement of its elements – in response to its marked lack of success in achieving its intent in testing. Access to the draft versions of the artworks may be arranged upon request, and walk-through videos of them will be posted to my website at www.camilleroberobinson.com alongside videos of this exhibition; both will be submitted with the dissertation.

By producing artworks following a rigorous rationale, and by systematically testing them against listeners' experiences, this project has been able to demonstrate that it is possible to make sonic artworks structured around critical discourses on listening, which foster critical reflection on listening by listeners. The predictability of the structure of listeners' experiences and the content of listeners' interpretations of the works has been shown to be more or less variable, depending on the specific artwork in question. Determining the conditions for these variations may provide the basis for further creative-research endeavor.

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