

Editorial: An Ear Alone is Not a Being – Embodied Mediations in Audio Culture

By Rachel O'Dwyer

Interference Journal – Issue 1

An Ear Alone is Not a Being: Embodied Mediations in Audio Culture

<http://www.interferencejournal.com>

In this inaugural issue of *Interference: a Journal of Audio Culture*, it is no longer necessary that we open the discussion with an appeal to the neglected sensory anthropologies, oblique or tangential histories, alternative geographies, communities or epistemologies that underscore an absence of sound from critical theory. Instead we begin with an acknowledgement of the growing engagement with the audible as a cultural trope, resonating through theoretical and artistic research and with a broader public consciousness.

The past decade has seen a range of publications, graduate programs, large scale festivals and events that specifically attend to ongoing work across sound studies, auditory culture and the sonic arts. These terms encompass a diversity of practices within anthropology, cultural studies, performance, musicology, technology studies and philosophy. Each of these carries its own legacy.

We establish this transdisciplinary journal now, not because of a lack of existing scholarship, but to draw together these strands of research towards an integrated dialogue. While disciplinary orientation, and its attendant discourses and practice, is a concern for general readership and dialogue within such a broad remit, the journal aims not to homogenise these discrete perspectives, but rather to treat the multiplicity of voices as a positive interference which can encourage new epistemic practices. Describing *Interference* as a transdisciplinary journal, therefore, does not suggest a mere combination of existing disciplines, such as the combination of music and anthropology, but a transgression of the traditional borders of participating discourses into something new that forges its own identity. A transdiscipline is expected to bridge several gaps; between the cultures of natural and social sciences, between specialists and generalists and between theoretical and practice-based research. Interference is concerned with transcending epistemic practices across usually discrete fields to produce audio cultures as a legitimate area of research and practice in itself. We view this as a gradual project, refined as the work published advances with ongoing research.



Christof Migone; *Microhole*; 2006 (Photo courtesy of the artist).

Each issue of the publication addresses a central topic. The title of our inaugural issue “*An Ear Alone is Not a Being*” : *Embodied Mediation in Audio Culture*, acknowledges acoustic practices that involve not just the ear but a corporeal body that senses, resonates, transduces and responds to sound, and furthermore, seeks to emphasize the legacy of this embodied listening subject in the practices, media, and conceptual frameworks that make up audio cultures. “Embodied mediation” presumes a reciprocal process: the texts in this issue explore not only how listening experiences and acoustic practices are shaped by corporeality, but also attend to the many ways in which those processes work upon that body, through psychophysical affect and the representation and encoding of listening subjects in acoustic performances, technologies and cultural artefacts.

The papers brought together highlight issues such as the mediation of gendered, racial, political and performing subjects, and, drawing on disciplinary knowledge from phenomenology, embodied music cognition, media and performance studies, suggest new frameworks for an embodied audio culture.

In her text *To Hear the Silence of Sound*, Author Nicole Furlonge examines the sonic construction of racial subjectivity as described in Ralph Ellison’s 1952 text, *The Invisible Man*. Drawing connections between the history of high fidelity recording, and Ellison’s textual account of mediated listening, Furlonge explores how the novel’s attention to the psychophysical properties of sound expand a strategy of embodied listening. Sound and furthermore, the growth of commercially available audio, enabled the subaltern empowerment of the listener in a society in which visibility was denied to some.

Where Furlonge identifies a relation between the growth of fidelity recording in 1950s America and the construction of a racial self, Daniel Ploeger’s paper *Sounds Like Superman* calls to attention the mediating role of biosonification techniques in performance art. Through a critical engagement with

the work of artists at the forefront of biosignal sonification, Ploeger adopts a gender critical approach, questioning the normative technological paradigms that operate within sound art and performance. Two assertions shape the work: an acknowledgement of the social construction of sonification technologies and furthermore, how these often gendered and political significations are carried through from technological artefact into audible signifier in performance.

Caroline Wilkins extends the theme of biosonification, exploring the liminal status of the human voice as both medium and message in *On hearing the Disposition of the Voice*. Wilkins' paper, situated within sound theatre studies, proposes a dramaturgy for *Zaum: Beyond Mind*, a sonic performance that fuses real-time vocal processing with a live vocalist. Using conceptual frameworks from performance studies and philosophy, Wilkins explores the material resonances between space, body and moving sonic forms, using live synthesis and sampling to stage an interaction between virtual "characters" and a live embodied performer.

Advancing a model of performance concerned with sympathetic resonance, Wilkins is complemented by Mckeown's theoretical re-evaluation of music as a mode of performing subjectivity. Both treat the voice as not only a medium for linguistic articulation, but as a site of resistance to the totalisation of language, manifesting a corporeal echo that cannot be reduced to a homogeneous signifier. Taking the perspective of Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian critique, and his discourse on the death drive, Ed Mckeon incorporates frameworks from embodied cognition, cognitive science and philosophy to offer fresh insights into performance strategies in the transition from desire to drive in the musical performing subject.

Milena Droumeva and Vincent Andrisani offer further insights into embodied subjectivity, and draw on a history of corporeal practices across the broad remit of sound studies in their paper *Toward a Cultural Phenomenology of Mediated Aural Practices*, exploring the relationship between the legacy of environmental and peripatetic practices such as soundscape ecology, soundwalking and current locative audio technology. Drawing on research in cultural studies and phenomenology, they advance a theoretical framework that extends the concept of embodiment to encompass cultural inter-subjectivity, and propose its application to future practices using mobile and context-aware media.

Though the texts in *An Ear Alone is Not a Being* strike out from a wide range of disciplines and points of focus, all foreground the contingency of sonic mediation on an underlying corporeal substrate. This body continues to resonate through contemporary audio cultures, technologies and practices, that not only encode or echo that body, but proceed in turn to shape the subjectivity of an embodied listener.

Acknowledgements

CTVR: The Centre for Telecommunications Research, The Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Science Gallery Trinity College Dublin, Frauke Behrendt, Brandon LaBelle, Michael Bull, Kim Cascone, Sonia Cillari, Steve Coleman, Steven Connor, Fionnuala Conway, Teresa Dillon, Linda Doyle, Marcia Epstein, Mark Fisher, Benjamin Gaulon, Mark Grimshaw, Francis Halsall, Paul Hegarty, Takuro Lippitt,

Declan Long, Maurizio Martinucci (TeZ), Martin McCabe, Maria O'Rourke, Nye Parry, Sharon Phelan, Pedro Rebelo, Franziska Schroeder, Tim Stott, Atau Tanaka, Barry Truax, Mick Wilson