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Editorial: Sound Methods

By Rachel O'Dwyer

"Is there a story that links one sound to another? You cannot help looking for a meaning, concealed perhaps not in single isolated noises but between them, in the pauses that separate them. And if there is a story, does that story concern you?" Italo Calvino

"There, dismiss every intrusion and distraction from your hearing. Concentrate: you must catch the woman's voice calling you and your voice calling her, together, in the same intention of listening (or would you call it the vision of your ear?)." Italo Calvino

A few days ago Dennis McNulty, a sound artist based in Dublin, introduced me to a short story by Italo Calvino called 'A King Listens'. I was surprised I hadn't encountered this text before in some written account of audio cultures, listening or sound art. But in the way that often happens I come across a second reference to the same story less than twenty-four hours later, this time in *En Abime* by writer Daniela Cascella, a book that explores listening and reading as interrelated critical and creative practices.

'A King Listens' is a story about a king who, having usurped another, is forced to remain forever seated on the throne. It seems, then, that the fact of physically occupying the seat is the only signifier of the kingship; no other material artefacts – no seals or ceremonies or binding documents – are brought into service. Instead, sovereignty begins and ends with the body of the king. Quitting the chair for an instant invites another to take up his place and so he lives in constant vigilance, unable to leave his throne.

The king's experience of the palace and the city beyond the surrounding walls is distilled to a single sense. Contrary to the more common representation of the sovereign through visual apprehension, sound becomes a cipher for reading the political and emotional temperature of the kingdom. Listening to the concrete sounds of the palace is like listening to a familiar performance where any unexpected note leaps out discordant, unexpected, the upbeat of a possible unrest.

From this position of enforced stasis, anatomy and architecture merge: "the palace is all whorls, lobes, it is a great ear... you are crouched at the bottom, in the innermost zone of the palace ear; the palace is the ear of the king". Sound bleeds the edges of interior or exterior, like John Cage's experience of an anechoic chamber, the king's own pulse and nervous system seem to convey hidden messages from the outside world, while the origins of seemingly external sounds are ambiguous – always possible memories or imagined resonances.

Gradually in the undulation of sounds, through the rhythm of bells and the call and response of whistles, the changing of sentries and the shouts and calls of the distant city, a woman's voice is carried to his ear on the distant air. Projecting his self outwards in search of her voice among the other cadences of the city, eventually the king is compelled to move beyond the palace walls and join his voice with hers in a passionate duet.

Calvino's tale resonates with this issue of *Interference*. For one, the story describes particular ways of knowing that are gleaned through listening. The King's knowledge of the world is distilled to an auditory epistemology or what Feld calls an 'acoustemology' (1994). From stillness, his ear projects him into concert with the surrounding landscape and his own memories. Furthermore, the story details many different attitudes to listening; there is not one auditory sensibility inscribed in the text but a taxonomy of listening practices: external, internal, embodied, disembodied, active, passive, peripatetic,

ABOUT INTERFERENCE

Interference is a biannual online journal in association with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media (Gradcam). It is an open access forum on the role of sound in cultural practices, providing a trans-disciplinary platform for the presentation of research and practice in areas such as acoustic ecology, sensory anthropology, sonic arts, musicology, technology studies and philosophy. The journal seeks to balance its content between scholarly writing, accounts of creative practice, and an active engagement with current research topics in audio culture. [[More](#)]

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Mark Peter Wright; *Exchanges*; 2013; Image courtesy of the artist. See [Still Listening?](#) for details.

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static, empirical, imaginative, secretive, observed, paranoid, acquisitive and so on. Finally, Calvino's story is not only about the act of listening, but the difficulties of inscribing sound into another sense, of authoring our listening or making our auditory experience resound for others. In a sense, the why and how and who of listening.

For this issue of *Interference* we invited papers that addressed any aspect of auditory cultures but placed some emphasis on the methodologies and frameworks that informed research and practice. Sound is an epistemological practice and methodology that is now brought to bear in areas such as sociology, anthropology, geography and cultural studies, to name just a few disciplines. Auditory practices now complement, augment or replace existing methods. This becomes about listening in the traditional sense – to spaces, histories or discourses – but it is also about developing particular embodied, temporal, or ambulatory attitudes to empirical enquiry. There is a 'sonic sensibility' and the approaches featured in this volume suggest that this goes beyond simply lending the world an ear. However, we also recognise that Sound Studies is now so well-established in its own right that it is time to take stock of the methods and approaches that constitute the discipline. As Mark Peter Wright points out in his contribution 'Still Listening', soundwalking has moved from a subaltern gesture to a normative methodology whose foundations are in need of further exploration. Similar claims can be made for sound art within the canon of fine art, performance and composition, and for audio cultures within the realm of cultural and anthropological enquiry. It is time, therefore, to interrogate the critical and ontological bases of well-founded practices such as soundwalking, soundmapping, field recording and electroacoustic performance.

Several papers look to cultivate formal and critical approaches to new media performances, going beyond traditional compositional and performance techniques to examine the effects that are part of live performance's dramaturgy. Rui Chaves and Felipe Hickmann in 'A Window Between: Mediation Strategies in Networked Sonic Arts' detail a dramaturgy for the representation of remote spaces and active bodies in networked performance practices. Networked performance describes performance situations where musicians in two or more spatially discrete locations are telematically connected by live feeds. This configuration brings new parameters to the fore, not only live instrumentation and its relationship to electroacoustic tape sounds, but a range of considerations specific to the constraints and affordances of the sociotechnical network. Here, Chaves and Hickmann treat attributes of the network as another compositional medium and ask how these qualities might be effectively written for and communicated in remote performance and improvisational practices going forward. The window as a familiar architectural trope is applied to compositional attributes in two live performances: *A man, a Mark, Amen* (2010) and *Paulista* (2011).

Alongside Chaves and Hickmann, several other submissions deal with the themes of presence and absence, where sound occupies a spectral position between the present and the remote. Guy Harries' contribution 'Evoking the Sublime: Absence and Presence in Live Electroacoustic Performance' also constructs a dramaturgy for live performance through an interdisciplinary study of types of evoked absence and presence in ritualistic contexts. Harries' contribution is applied to the bodies that are occasioned or disoccasioned in sound recording and tape music. This includes disembodied performances, hidden sources and spectral ambiguities between the real, the imagined and the mnemonic.

In 'Spectral Soundscapes: Exploring Spaces of Remembrance through Sound', Iain Foreman looks at the soundwalk as an exploration of the subjective relationship between landscape and memory. However, instead of dwelling on the importance of corporeal experience in knowing places, Foreman considers the ways that our 'being there'/dwelling is continually disrupted by absence and haunting. Here, the author conveys an auditory practice that unsettles the relationship between site and self rather than attempting to fix it in time and place. Foreman asks how the hauntological and archival method typical of writers such as W.G. Sebald might be translated into soundscape and field recording practices to find appropriate methods for tracing out a process of distancing, absencing, loss and disappearance, what Foreman calls an auditory palimpsest. Instead of the traditional iconographic representation of the soundscape in other words, can we identify phonographic practices that represent erasure and loss as much as inscription?

Alongside Foreman, Kim Cascone and Mark Peter Wright are both critical of normative practices surrounding sound recording, sound walking and soundmapping. In his contributed note 'Transcendigital Imagination: Developing Organs of Subtle Perception', Kim Cascone argues that field recording has been negatively shaped by a digital sensibility and with it a need to constantly collect, quantize and quantify acoustic phenomena. This privileges the act of recording over other holistic ways of listening. Cascone describes instead a 'transcendigital' methodology for developing new

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organs of perception and new relationships between the sound artist, technologies and his or her environment. He argues that in order for sound artists to resurrect and develop their perception, they need to cultivate critical approaches to a 'purely sensory-based mode of listening', a new sonic sensibility that breaks with the dominant audile technique.

In Calvino's 'A King Listens', the protagonist maps the surrounding locale from stasis; indeed, the ear was an organ to explore without ever leaving the throne. Similarly, in his paper 'Still Listening', Mark Peter Wright suggests a counter-project to the now dominant methodology of soundwalking, proposing instead a 'still listening' that argues for active listening as its own ambulatory and cartographic practice. Wright points out how geopolitical, gendered and class issues infringe on the practice of walking in many contexts. Where movement through space is not always a given, listening is still an available strategy for exploration. Similar to Cascone and Foreman, Wright is also critical of a phonographic (or iconographic) recording practice, pointing towards an ephemeral listening in his own practice 'I do not want to press record; I want to listen'.

Also engaged with the soundwalk, sound artist Leandra Lambert details an experimental methodology for sonic explorations in 'Experienced Sonic Fictions'. Lambert draws on 'hodology', the study of pathways, in a sonic exploration of sites in her native Brazil. Using sound walking as the starting point, the artist constructs fictions and fantasias of three familiar spaces: Atlantic Ocean, Atlantic Forest and Atlantic Avenue. For Lambert, soundwalking is about epistemology, but it is also about worldmaking, constructing atlases and intersensorial cartographies.

Expanding on Sandoval's notion of differential consciousness in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Lydia French puts forward the concept of differential listening as a technique that is depicted in Chican@ literature. Where differential consciousness is an oppositional ideology that involves interpretative strategies for visual metaphors, in 'Chican@ Literature of Differential Listening', French attends to the ways in which hearing and listening are articulated to social structures of power and strategies of dissent. In doing so, the author identifies active listening techniques that are oppositional, resistant and transformative. Listening and not just speaking can be a political act. French goes further and demonstrates how these differential listening practices contest the ideologies out of which auditory fidelity emerges. Instead, Chican@ literature depicts a counter-history of audition and audile technique contrary to those described in histories of Western media.

Interference would like once more to thank all of the people who contribute to the journal, as peer reviewers, advisors, editors and of course, writers.

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