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An Introduction to listening

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An Introduction to listening

Anne Sèdes

Translation : Tresl Murphy

- 1 The theme of this sixth edition of Hybrid is listening, where art intersects with human mediation, with a particular focus on the changes brought about by digital technologies.
- 2 Our starting point was to treat listening as a living, human activity, one that is singular and social, and intersubjective; in action within the cognitive loop of the body and in interaction with our artistic, organological, digital and societal environment, from an interdisciplinary, even undisciplined epistemological perspective.
- 3 Rather than providing an overview of the state of the art by highlighting a few big names in philosophical academia, or listing the well-known categories of the ontology of listening (causal listening, reduced listening, semantic listening, ecological listening...), we decided instead to take the road less travelled and open up to a diverse range of approaches. Renewal sometimes requires a left-field approach in order to get to the heart of a subject.
- 4 Listening is a more complex notion than it would appear, we are publishing a far from exhaustive selection of texts and interviews that bear witness to the broad range of ongoing questions, research and creations currently examining the diverse approaches and disciplines to the subject.
- 5 We start with an informal interview with Michèle Castellengo, a musician and music acoustics specialist. Our aim was not to understand how physical science measures sound and audible material, but rather to attempt to measure the gap between listening to so-called musical sound as a committed bodily human activity, in action, and the way the exact sciences describe hearing and listening in terms of the physics of sound. Listening as a study topic also involves examining the relationship to others, questioning the vocabulary used to talk about it, the parts borrowed from other fields and its heritage. It also means questioning what makes music, music.
- 6 In another field entirely, that of human interaction in an urban milieu, we get a perspective on Anthony Pecqueux's socio-anthropological approach to nomad listening

and portable devices, that we see in public transport and other public spaces, and today's digital technologies. Studying the interactions between listeners with portable music systems and the urban spaces they pass through set "to a sound-track", the sociologist promotes a pluralist approach to listening, that goes beyond the categorical hierarchies of hearing and listening, in the interest of a pragmatic epistemology of sound in tandem with a model of social ecology.

- 7 The contemporary art historian Marie Vicet relates another experience of the walker-listener as she takes us back to *Les immatériaux*, a legendary exhibition that took place at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1985, and is today considered to be a consecration of post-modernism according to Jean-François Lyotard. The show featured a major innovation: visitors were given a pair of wireless headphones that transmitted sounds throughout the exhibition. They did not provide a commentary on the pieces like a typical "audioguide", but instead transmitted a series of recordings of texts by writers and philosophers, soundscapes and music that reflected the themes of the exhibition, integrating the frequency jamming and technical gaps in the transmission system. Designed as a huge metaphor for the lot of man in a post-modern world, according to those present at the time, the exhibition left the visitor-walker lost in a world where they were equipped to listen, but were forced to hear the inaudible.
- 8 Digital technology has led to astonishing changes in the way we listen. Comic books, for example, which up until now were purely visual, to be read and heard *inside* one's head, are currently undergoing a sea change thanks to the literary, typographical and artistic inventiveness of their authors. Philippe Paolucci, a specialist in the information and communication sciences, shows us how comic books are exploring digital hybridization, as they integrate movement, interaction and elements of sound, effects, shouts, voiceovers, soundscapes and music. Because these developments call on two different cognitive temporalities, visual attention on the one hand and auditory attention on the other, comic book readers become immersed in the narrative, and risk losing their own imaginative and temporal autonomy, as they are being stimulated by external sounds. Can the hybridization of comic books through digital experimentation be considered an art undergoing a mutation?
- 9 In the fine arts, pictorial abstraction in the twentieth century led artists to listen to sound plastically, to make the invisible visible through paint, through sculpture, through the arts of lighting and moving images. In her article, art historian Léa Dreyer goes back over the heritage of the artists that attended the school at the Villa Arson, and in particular that of Lars Fredrikson, who was recruited in 1970 as an engraving teacher, but who dedicated his teaching and artistic career to the plasticity of sound, as a radically non-musical art. His commitment changed as technology, both analogical and digital, developed but it remained dominated by the idea of listening and feeling with the body, under language. Lars Fredrickson managed to create an actual school of plastic sound, and contributed to the emerging field of sound studies. Indeed, Fredrikson's approach did not only cover sounds audible to the ear in given surroundings, but all forms of vibration, infrasound, ultrasound, magnetic, in other words, everything that fell under the banner of temporal material for sensible listening.
- 10 In the same area of listening transmitted or received other than through the ear, Gabriela Patinos-Lakatos, Benoît Navarret and Hugues Genevois experiment with vibrotactile sensations to investigate the potential of listening to a sound and musical

signal through touch, in the stringent experimental conditions of the LAM, (Laboratoire d'Acoustique Musicale in Paris). Their research, into vibroacoustics, examines how each individual's sensory experience is subjective, as is the way they describe it. Their promising early results came from examining musical composition and teaching thanks to composer Pascale Criton's work with young deaf people and a mixed public that included hearing people, hard-of-hearing people and the visually impaired, revealing the importance of the social and shared dimension of the listening experience. Future perspectives for this research focus on bodily engagement augmented by digital systems for musicians as well as for listeners and the hearing impaired.

- 11 The body, technology and perception are also at the heart of Andrea Giomi's take on listening as an embodied phenomenon, using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenology, Francisco Varela's cognitive theories of enaction, James Gibson's ecological models and March Leman's embodied listening process as a basis. In order to illustrate his theoretical approach, Andrea Giomi presents a video of one of his choreographed pieces where his bodily engagement is augmented by sensors that measure muscular activity, movement and position in space, and where he interacts with the resulting sound feedback in real time.
- 12 In practice, Giomi's conceptual and technological system can be compared to work by Kitsou Dubois, a gravity choreographer, for whom the bodily engagement of listening is at the heart of her work training young dancers and circus performers. The "Infinite body" research project, an extraordinary laboratory for artistic invention, was developed at Labex Arts-H2H, providing training through research and creation, that blended movement, visual projection and sound immersion, for a transformational mixed-media approach to the circus arts. The conversation covers this experiment, that is still ongoing, and is progressing toward hybrid, immersive productions between circus arts and choreography. A video extract is presented as a trace.
- 13 Getting back to more traditionally, but highly contemporary, musical questions, the composer-researcher Eric Maestri shows us his reflexivity on his own listening activity, a projective listening process he used when composing his piece "Trans" for saxophone and electronics, that he makes available to us online. He takes us through the various listening processes he uses when composing a mixed piece, from compositional acts linking the articulations of traditional writing for the acoustic performer with whom he exchanges constantly, to synthesising, treating and transforming sound by computer, so as to build what will become the listening experience proposed to the audience. His approach is based on projecting the listening process toward others to share a moment of music.

- 14 Sharing the listening process and performing experimental, often inaccessible pieces of music obviously depends on sharing knowledge. The objective of the “La musique au-delà du numérique” Mooc initiated in 2018 as part of the So’Culture programme at ComUE Paris Lumières was how do spread knowledge about computer-based electroacoustic music to a wide audience. How can we teach people to hear the subtle, obscure and hidden expressiveness of sound treated by the chain of digitally-based, electroacoustic transformations, beyond the technological and aesthetic changes wrought by recording techniques and operations that can be felt musically, from the post-war period to the present day? Anne Sèdes, Dominique Saint-Martin and Christine Webster go over this surprising, ongoing adventure, and have selected 10 pieces among the best composed by the Mooc “learners” from the 1st session in 2018-2019.
- 15 These articles follow the path of a multiple, dynamic epistemology of listening that works as a loop connecting knowledge and teaching, research and creation, leaving aside the reductive and static objectivity of the ontologies of traditionally restricted disciplines. This operational, transitory and transformational epistemology puts human commitment at the centre of these auditory, artistic, literary, musical and organological worlds. It is also an epistemology that will serve research, science and sharing in all of the fields covered by Labex Arts-H2H that are now interconnected with the broad themes and multiple research and experimental avenues of the current École Universitaire de Recherche ArTeC: creation as a research activity, new modes of writing and publishing, technologies and human mediations.
- 16 We hope you enjoy reading this edition, like a great inner listening experience.

AUTHORS

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Anne Sèdes is a professor in the music department of Université Paris 8. Undisciplined, her research focuses on computer science and music creation, mixed composition, virtual environments and creation, spatialization of sound, music and cognition, the creation of research activity, be it musical, organological or software, and finally the epistemology of the sciences of art.

She has been involved in many projects such as "Creating sound spaces" (Young researchers project 2003-2006), "HD3D" (Cap Digital, 2007-2010), "Virage" (ANR 2009-2010), "HOA Library (Labex-Arts-H2H, 2012-2015), "Musicoll" (ANR, 2016-2018), "Infinite Body" (Labex Arts-H2H, 2016-2018).

Composer, she develops all of her artistic productions in

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Anne Sèdes belonged to the management team of LABEX Arts-H2H before joining EUR ArTeC.

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