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# Intimate Listening

PEADER KIRK, TEOMA J. NACCARATO & JOHN MACCALLUM

We exist in a universe of sound ... and we can't stop listening ... Sound evokes place not space. That is to say sound is where we locate ourselves ... It is our greatest experience of intimacy.  
(Sellars cited in Kaye and LeBrecht 2009: iv)

We are interested in intimacy, in listening as intimacy. We are Peader Kirk, a theatre maker who has created a number of works under the rubric of 'sound as performance' and approaches listening to the body's interior as a sound world for performative exploration. We are Teoma Naccarato and John MacCallum, collaborators in a long-term artistic research and creation project focused on the critical appropriation of biosensors in choreographic and compositional practice.

We came together at the *Conventions of Proximity in Art, Theatre and Performance Symposium* at Birkbeck, University of London in May 2016, to co-facilitate a workshop on the theme of *Intimate Listening*.

## WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

After a time focusing on awareness as a listening subject, the initial part of the workshop involved solo and partner work with analog stethoscopes, during which the role of the listener and listened-to become multiplied and intertwined.

In the later part of the session we introduced digital stethoscopes and transducers to create a context for collective listening; by placing the transducers – which were pulsing and vibrating with the live signal from the stethoscope – on their own and one another's bodies, the group selected shared points for tactile listening, and became entangled in a moving embrace.

Throughout the workshop, our approach was guided by curiosity about the spaces between 'immediate' listening (for example, placing an ear to your partner's chest), and 'mediate' auscultation (for example, with a stethoscope), in which somatic and augmented interpretations are co-constituted).<sup>1</sup>

Our work references Pauline Oliveros' practice of *Deep Listening*,<sup>2</sup> although through the practices we describe in these pages, we aim to complicate accounts of involuntary hearing versus voluntary listening. We propose that what emerges through intimate listening is attention to relational rhythms between human performers, the environment and the listening instrument itself.



<sup>1</sup> For more on the concept of immediate versus mediate auscultation, see Sterne (2001).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Pauline Oliveros, see *Deep Listening Institute* (2016).

■ Photo Gaby Szabo



In what follows, we provide fragments of prose and imagery inspired by the workshop. Some of the fragments reproduce the prompts used during the workshop, or reflect upon the experience of the workshop, while others capture our varied and complimentary concerns in relation to sound and listening.

Throughout, the text drifts across history, practice, theory and bodies, and, likewise, across our multiple voices and perspectives.

#### LISTENING – WITH INTIMACY AND DESIRE

I place the stethoscope to your chest, and listen for the rhythmic lub-dub of your heart valves closing, both in my earpiece, and through the pulsing transducer in my hand. I am not a medical doctor, and certainly not your doctor; my interpretation of these sounds is decidedly un-diagnostic, and, yet, I make sense from somewhere, somehow.

When we listen to the enunciations of one another's hearts, how do our intentions, expectations and training, as well as the given context – including the stethoscope itself – affect our interpretations? More interestingly perhaps, how can our appropriation of stethoscopes in an artistic context incite dialogue with medical culture, such that each practice sheds light on the value systems of the other?

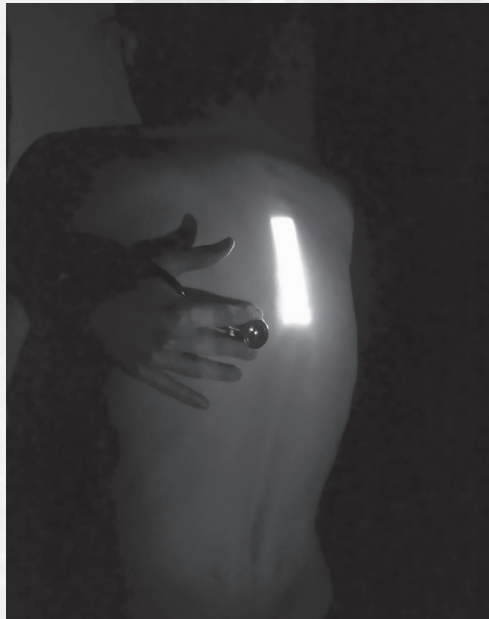
Jonathan Sterne emphasizes the role of training and mediation in evaluations of stethoscope signals, throughout the history of Western medicine:

While empiricism is usually cited as the operative epistemology of early modern medicine, an epistemology of mediation is equally central to the apprehension of that sensory data which would yield up its truth: you had to have the right tools and training to hear it for yourself; the truth might not immediately yield itself up for the untrained listener. (Sterne 2001:118)

We are untrained in the use of stethoscopes for medical diagnosis: we cannot tell you 'the truth' about your heart. We desire something else: an intimate mode of listening.

Regarding our desires as listeners, consider this: "listen", like "lust", also shares a common root in the Old English "list" – to like, desire or to lust to do something. It is a concept that combines agency and desire' (Lacey 2013:17). In our artistic practices, and likewise in medical settings, how are agencies and desires differently distributed, and differentially performed?

■ Photo Gaby Szabo



#### MODES OF LISTENING

As we move towards one another as listening and sounding subjects we attend across a range of modes – modes that, following Musique Concrete composer Pierre Schaeffer, critic Michel Chion has identified as:

*Causal* listening is that which seeks to link the sound heard to its causal source – the buzz of the fly leading us to look around for the insect.

*Semantic* listening finds meaning in a particular sound on the basis of its position within a system of sounds – the ringing of a bell during a church service.

*Reduced* listening focuses on the sound itself rather than its source or presumed meaning. (Chion 1994:25–30)

From moment to moment a listening subject can move across these modes, and in composing a piece a practitioner such as Schaeffer may choose to prioritize one mode of listening; for example, Musique Concrete prioritizes reduced listening. In this workshop encounter we consciously seek to foreground and problematize these modes as exclusive positions for the listening subject. Participants drift in, out and across these modes of listening, attending to self and other, entering a shared space of sounding and attending.



## ENTERTAINING LISTENING – ANALOG STETHOSCOPE SOLOS AND DUETS

We begin walking, winding down the tempo and giving into gravity. Not yet using any extra bodily technologies of attending we find ourselves lying on the floor.

Attending to qualia rather than seeking outcome  
Attending to the nature and process of sensing  
Attending as reception rather than expectation  
Attending as encounter  
Attending to the landscape beneath the skin. Listen in.

Now the stethoscope. This prosthetic.  
Fingers spread around the edge  
Press or place.  
Listen into the body.  
Listen for silence, for the absence of silence  
The gaps and individualities in sounding  
Feel into the landscape, sense to sense

Attend to this body, your body.  
Can you hear thoughts?



Now with another: offer listening points, exchange soundings,  
laugh if you want to. The body has humour.  
Can you hear your partner listening? Your own listening?  
Move around each other as you move through sound.  
Let touch be part of it.  
Where is there nothing to be heard?  
Turn. Move. Flow. Pause. Attend. Stillness.

With the recognition that silence is coterminous with sound, ... the ground from which sound springs and to which it ultimately returns, Cage developed a compositional strategy that favoured coexistence ahead of opposition. Silence preceded and exceeded sound and by so doing dissolved the binaries of sound/silence into a form of continuity. One point of silence then is to dissolve the oppositional by freely allowing other voices to be heard.  
(Katz 1999: 231–52)



■ Photos Gaby Szabo

## ENTANGLED LISTENING – DIGITAL STETHOSCOPE AND TRANSDUCERS

We begin with a digital stethoscope and six transducers; the transducers are like mini haptic speakers that vibrate with the heart and lung sounds from the stethoscope. Positioning these objects on our own and one another's bodies, we enter into an embrace.

It is like a game of Dr Tangle,<sup>3</sup> but with no doctor: my heart is beating in your palm; your breath gurgles in his belly; his pulse knocks gently at her temple; as she inhales, they feel a rush up the back of their neck.

In our continual reconfigurations, we invite disorientation between bodies and body parts. The 'source' of the heartbeat multiplies and materializes throughout our entangled flesh.

In this listening practice, we edge towards a different enunciation of subjectivity: 'not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:3).

<sup>3</sup> Dr Tangle is a game in which a group holds hands in a circle and, keeping their hands in contact, individuals cross under, over and around one another until their bodies are entangled and a 'doctor' then enters to help the members of the group to untangle themselves back into the original circle.



We are listening – not to one another – but to the synaesthetic rhythms that multiply between our folded bodies: a pulse, an itch, a scent, a sigh – a mutual pause – exhale.

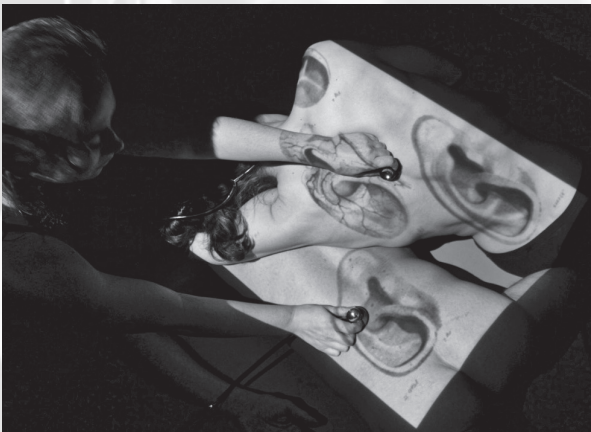
Silence, almost: the speakers hum; the room is warm; the light is fluorescent; our eyes are closed; we are breathing together. I hear all of this, through all of this.

Hearing – immediately and mediately – always filtered by my skin, my ear, my memory, the stethoscope, the transducer, our context ...

Slipping: between somatic and technological or analog and digital; between involuntary and voluntary, or hearing and listening; between self and other and surroundings.

Our context: partial and plural; always mediated; a dynamic ecology in which 'one part is always multiply connected, acting by virtue of those connections, and always variable, such that it can be registered as a pattern' (Fuller 2005:4).

Our pattern: a rhizome.



■ Photos Gaby Szabo

## LISTENING<sup>2</sup>

Structurally, *Intimate Listening* accentuates a process of discovery inviting a participant to choose between a range of interactive possibilities. The listening of the 'hearing' participant is doubled and intensified by the inability of the 'sounding' participant to hear inside themselves that none the less tunes up their sensual awareness, a straining to hear. As a role-shifting participant moving between sounding and listening and often simultaneously standing in both positions, I am reflexively aware of my self as a sound world, my exploration of a sound world and my listening to listening. This 'challenges notions of objectivity and subjectivity, and reconsiders the possibility and place of meaning' (Voegelin 2010:120).

Meaning making is here subsumed under the event of sounding and hearing. Meaning arises from the event and not the information carried by the sound. Sense is produced through the act of listening and not through the reception of an object's attributes. We locate ourselves in sounding and attending through a developing intimacy. Listening to listening. Listening<sup>2</sup>.

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