

SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Music

Communing with *the Virtual*

Sound, Composition, Improvisation, and Affective Listening

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sound is something felt, a force that echoes and morphs, is sculpted by ears, and bodies, and

trees, and

birds, and cities.

and concrete,

and voices,

and cellos,

and tiktok audios,

and generators,

and planes,

and water,

and burps,

and fabric,

and bear fur,

and fish, and space, and air, and maybe even aliens .

sound

travels through this body to yours. creates trace. echoes within the

frequencies of that voice in your head reading these words . pervasive refraction.

the virtual ... “a realm of potential” (Massumi: 30) - a

multiplicity. felt in sensation, in an inability to trace and render. a

tangibility making its way to different modes of consciousness. *the*

virtual a force which floats eyes across the page to action, *affect*

bridging access to this domain

Sound functions as a consuming force, pervasive, mutating and reforming within multiple dimensions and temporalities. Sound, an entity which constantly registers multiple forms and affects. Sound which informs our ear and is equally crafted by it. The resonance of our bodies - becoming morphed and sculpted in its exchange. Sound as “the possibility for multiplicity, a ghosted and unsteady territory populated by such diversity: [where] even in that moment of hearing myself, whether my own voice speaking to myself, or maybe hearing the sounds of my steps across the pavement, sound becomes like a second body echoing away from the first -- these sounds fall away from my body and in doing so they immediately unsettle any form of singularity: [where] what I hear is not myself, but myself hearing myself, as another, and another: [what creates ourself] as always already an echo.” (Labelle) Sound which in its intangibility of defining its complete resonance has inspired me to reflect on its nature within multiple fields and ideologies - more specifically Brian Massumi’s collection on *the virtual*, and *affect*; as well as conversations on sound art, composition, and improvisation in their crafting of a relation to this realm of sound.

Sound as a force of *the virtual*:

Sound is a force of resonance, constantly encompassing that which is lived. In the process of writing this, I have found that trying to convey the nature of sound is like trying to convey the nature of something like the intangibility of love, and yet it is so much more. It exists outside of human nature and human definition. Sound functions as “*the virtual*, the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, [] a realm of *potential*.” (Massumi: 30)

In finding a definition for sound, understanding its absence as much as its presence becomes necessary. An absence which is never truly existent. Our silence filled with as much resonance as our noise. John Cage’s famous piece 4’33’ proves this in its noise filled four minutes and thirty-three seconds of notated silence. Sound, much like virtual forces is always present, even separate from our definition.

Sound, as *the virtual*, is a space for abstraction - where one rendering can be true along that of its negation. Where sound “is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt --albeit reduced and contained. For out of the pressing crowd and individual action or expression *will* emerge and be registered consciously.” (Massumi: 30) These paradoxes elicit a nature of multiplicity in our understanding of virtual forces. The multiplicity we see in *the virtual*, we also can find in spaces of improvisation and performance. Bridging our communing with these virtual forces of sound.

Within improvisation, this multiplicity can be tangible, an energy of listening and responding, or not responding, or in fact not listening at all; all of which creating a sum total of these arrangements. As Frederic Rzewski states in *Little Bangs: A Nihilist Theory of Improvisation*, “time is not just a linear sequence, in which the past conditions the future. It is also a continuous present, in which each moment is a new beginning ... Each moment is a reenactment of creation ... the universe of improvisation is constantly being created; or rather, in each moment, a new universe is created ... Although events may seem to succeed each other in an orderly way; each one somehow growing out of the one that preceded it, there is no reason why this must necessarily be so ... At any moment, an event may occur for no reason at all, with

no relation at all to the preceding event... In this universe each moment is an entelechy, with both its cause and its end contained in itself.” (Rzewski: 32) Temporality itself exists as polychronic, with a virtual conception of sound, a space rendered through various means.

As a vocalist my own voice exists in different temporalities and spaces, all conflicting in the sounds they create, the way they are perceived and resonant. My own understanding of timbre, intention, resonance become only a small fraction of the larger sound and interaction; even when performing as a soloist. Listening and response becomes its own rendering of those liminal interactions. When we move into spaces of composition both within western classical tradition and improvisation, composition defines its parameters, rendering *the virtual* in that which the parameters are not. Within performance of these compositions, *the virtual* is witnessed in different interpretations, emotional responses, engagements with restless or focused audiences. For example, although traditions of western-classical composition maintain strict sets of notated parameters for almost exact replication in each performance, exact replication is never achieved. An orchestral crescendo rises a bit more in the strings than in the woodwinds, an audience member coughs at a silent tension crafting a string of reactions and new engagements within that moment. Yet, the score itself becomes a rendering of these moments - with full understanding of its inability to render the full affect of each performance. From western-classical performances to spaces of improvisation, engagement with scored renderings notate the parameters for which to engage with this excess of affect.

Listening as the creation of Affect:

The act of listening is one which intrinsically enacts a communing with sound as force. Listening as distinct from hearing - involving some conscious conception of sounds rather than a purely physical processing. Our everyday interactions with sound typically engage within the subconscious analytical experience. Sound waves enter through our ears and we define and link them to something previously understood: sirens in the distance, a bird, footsteps we recognize as different family members. All of which are vibrations analyzed and categorized, able to create a functional perception of our auditory landscape.

The categorization of these vibrations lends itself to the dismissal of that which exists outside of origin. Sound and listening write their definition. For example, a sonogram of a siren will act as a visual representation of the frequencies of the ‘origin’ sound, in this case, a falling tone coming from a moving amplifier. This visual rendering functions similarly to the score, through science based parameters and language. Where the accuracy of translating these vibrations has led to its own subculture of audiophiles and ‘vinyl junkies’; visual renderings already fail in their inability to illustrate the way in which frequencies gain new character and distinction on their surroundings: the way they bounce off each other, gain new tones from the objects they resonate against, certain tones lost in other excess noise, etc. Through our conditioning of an audible language, a siren as a siren, its location and movement map in our brains as it travels across a street, all create its functional usage of mapping our environment. Physical renderings - for example, a vinyl recording of sirens - are not fully capable of documenting a complete representation of an origin sound. As our origin is not the siren alone,

but the siren moving through a crowded street with sound waves bouncing and hopping through buildings, pushing through our bodies, creating a composite sonic event out of this multiplicity. This process of reaffirming a particular perception of sound as connected to an origin is one similar to Derrida's understanding of writing, that "the value of the transcendental arche [origin] must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace which then becomes the origin of the origin." (Derrida: 2998x:xvi)

Distinctions of sound origin as auditory embody Derrida's writing of the arche. As a result, trace as a force of *the virtual* in relation to the nature of Affect within its multiplicity is enforced and redirected - the necessity of perception in listening as a core of this enactment. Through bringing a focus to different experiences of listening, shifting ears to focus on background noise, higher frequencies, creating sound as an experience of listening - trace becomes reinforced. Sound as *the virtual* becomes a space away from origin, from rendering, from force - all of which is necessary for engaging in that which it isn't. That which is affect.

"Affect is *the virtual as a point of view*, provided the visual metaphor is used guardedly. For affect is synesthetic, implying a participation of the senses in each other: the measure of a living thing's potential interactions is its ability to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another ... Affects are *virtual synesthetic perspectives* anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. *Its autonomy is its openness*. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture* -- and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. Something remains unactualized, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective." (Massumi: 35)

If we maintain our understandings of sound as a force of *the virtual*. Listening is our affect, "the measure of ... potential interactions ... to transform the effects of one sensory mode into those of another." (Massumi: 35) Listening allows us full potential for interactivity through conscious and unconscious modes. Our ears - through their own physicality - already morph and filter sound waves before ever reaching paths of our subconscious. This crafts Affect as it enables *the virtual* in its communing with Virtual forces, a visceral engagement.

Interactive sound art is one means of rendering this exchange providing slightly abstracted mechanisms for communing with Sound as *the virtual*. We can see this with works such as Liz Phillips,' *Shaded Bandwidths*, 2001.

"In *Shaded Bandwidths* [...] Phillips used the ghosting phenomenon experienced by anyone crossing a bridge and listening to a car radio to explore the nature of matter. [...] Massive structure arching over an ever-circulating stream,

solid trumping fluid: the water is crossed, the radio is blocked. However, we know from elementary physics that matter is energy; it also flows. Working with the currents of water and wind and bandwidths, Phillip's work rematerialized the fields of energy surrounding the bridge and the cars and people on it as it dematerialized the steel that temporarily blocked their circulation. [...] Phillips delves into the absences and fills them with the interfering presences themselves. In so doing, she brings the complex interactivity of buildings and forces into human scale. What appears to be a continual frustration within modern life turns into play, because "the interruptions contains bits of different colored noise," as she notes. (Rabinowitz: 2002)

In this work, Phillips crafts a space for engaging with *the virtual*. A space utilizing the interactivity of sound, its multiplicity in shifting temporalities to allow the participant moving through the space to play with each *virtual* Force. Her work becomes Affect in its ability to tap into play, recognition, and both utilization of and setting the framework for *the virtual* force of sound. Sound art becomes a fertile space for these interactions with *the virtual* as it renders not the affect or scored parameters for recreation but creates an environment of multiplicity itself. It renders the space of *the virtual* allowing for affect and change in interaction. In *Shaded Bandwidths*, this interaction uses the physical body to augment the sonic field. The physical body eliciting each engagement, as directive for each movement is provoked through recognition of sonic changes. *Shaded Bandwidths* encourages the participant to both use their own physicality in directly moving each sound as well as to engage with their own perceptions of their listening, to understand the correlation and in that space of recognition - to play.

Another space for communing with *the virtual*, is the practice of Deep Listening. This explorative form of listening is often thought of as being coined through Pauline Oliveros' 'Sonic Mediations,' a set of text compositions written in Mount Tremper, NY in 1971. These pieces are instructional compositions for both soloists and group performers, which range from vague to specific in the actions asked of the participant. One piece, 'Energy Changes' outlines a re-rendering of the sonic environment,

"listen to the environment as a drone. Establish contact mentally with all of the continuous external sounds and include all of your own continuous internal sounds, such as blood pressure, heartbeat, and nervous system. When you feel prepared, or when you are triggered by a random or intermittent sound from the external or internal environment, make any sound you like in one breath, or a cycle of like sounds. When a sound or a cycle of sounds, is completed re-establish mental connection with the drone, which you first established before making another sound or cycle of like sounds." (XIII, Sonic Mediations)

In this meditation, vocalizations act as a rendering of the sonic environment. Participants are asked to explore their listening as a path to finding new, unfamiliar sounds, analyzing this conditioning of priorities. Participants in Pauline Oliveros' piece are then asked to make their own sounds, vocalizations become render these priorities, they are a display of force that allow conversation around sensation to be experienced rather than actualized. Through inviting the participant to listen, Oliveros creates a space to navigate the sonic world as one with different

avenues of focus, different paths, to, as Deleuze may put it, use listening as “a force [which] must be exerted on a body, on a point of the wave.” (Deleuze, 2003:49) This use of listening as force then functions as an act of rendering in which the vague nature of the participant allows for interaction with the ghostly nature of sound. That which exists beyond any distinctions brought forth by the listener. The rendering a re-establishment of one’s connection with this ghost. Something away from any origin of sound as the ‘imaginary,’ moving beyond origins of sound and focusing on the ghost as an access to Trance.

The notion of the ghost in relation to sound is one coined by other sound artists as well. Dirty Ear Forum, a collaborative meeting space based in Berlin which focuses on generating art and conversation around sound highlights this idea in their very name. Where dirt becomes something ill defined, a property understood but rarely found or freed of. One of its founders, Brandon Labelle outlines one functioning of sound and listening in relation to a affective listening practice of these *virtual forces* in his statement detailing his relationship to the exploration of sound:

“I would say that sound is movement itself --- already my voice is moving into this room. Yet where it, or any sound will end up can be appreciated as sort of open horizon of possibility: maybe it will find its way into your listening, maybe it will leak out of the window, or maybe it will slip under door to be heard by someone hiding there... Which is to say, that sound is fundamentally a poetic movement, because it immediately invites, or I might say, requires the imagination. What I hear might be something, or it might be nothing; it moves into the open space, it tries to reach me: in other words, sound is an act of proliferation -- it is always more than you think. It rushes forward, touching walls and floors, brushing against this body; it is a special agitation, because as a consequence of its intense movements it also coheres and unites: it brings together; we are already participating in the space that it creates. You can’t escape, you can’t hide; this sound has got you -- it has all of us, it carries us along in its wave, pushing us together.” (Labelle)

This kind of listening, dubbed “dirty” by Labelle, is one which centers itself around navigating the exchange of *the virtual* within affect. It requires a type of belief in that which exists beyond our prioritized renderings of sounds. These renderings exist in our identification of sonic vibration as connected to origin, and as such, identifying sounds and generative sound work akin to Pauline Oliveros’ ‘Sonic Meditations’ become a rendering of force. This rendering of parameters of force enacting communing as affect. As Deleuze puts it, within a slightly different context of the word force, “if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation “gives: something completely different from the forces that condition it.” (48) Sound exists as a multiplicity of these forces, of its own conditioning, of its origin and ghost, its attack and decay. Its sensation different from its condition as a symptom of its very multiplicity.

Sound is a force of resonance. Inherent in its nature a multiplicity of its existence. From its creation it bounces off other waves, is absorbed and re-resonant through different types of mass and if our ears are close enough morphs its way to our own perception. Our perception

forcing sound to filter through conditioned preferences of noise and melody, affective at the exact moment of listening. Sound in this multiplicity of its origin, conditioning, perceptions, and paradox is a “realm of *potential*” (Massumi: 30) Thus, by purely communing with its forces, playing with its conditionings, we might just allow sound to get us.

IV scores for communing:

I.

Take a walk at night.

Find a crossing of nature and brick

Sit in the grass.

Track the sounds from left to right.

Breathe in the tempo of each sound.

Place your fingertips on a chest and track the movement of your ears.

Separate machinery from nature.

Live in each.

(Variation 1: for group, half live in each then switch)

II.

make continuous noise for 45 minutes

complete silence for five minutes - maintain the tension

find the space in between the lines

merge textures (ode to set fire to the sky)

III.

Locate a noise between your gut and your knees.

Grasp towards its curves - follow waveform inward [in its own time!]

Scratch at each peak, shift pulse.

Rotate all that exists on an axis of your choosing.

Build tension, find release.

Trace the high hums above you.

IV.

Breathe in

To the drone a frequency below the space in your ears.

Hold it.

Notice how each sound passed, how your ears jump to catch it.

Breath out, release your eyes.

Watch for movement - light within self

Shifting of particles

The way they live & bounce & shift & meet & merge & crash & split & reconfigure,
dance

Breathe in - notice each swell of space. Release the first time you feel your body within it.

Citations:

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