

Conversation: Jill Halstead and Brandon LaBelle

On the occasion of Social Acoustics Seminar #1:

Sound, Hearing, Movement, Performativity

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With presentations and panel including:

Lisa Busby & John Harries

Kari Anne K. Drangslund

Cecilia Jonsson

Wolfgang Schmid

Sveinung Sundfør Sivertsen

Karsten Specht

Moderated by Jill Halstead and Brandon LaBelle

Brandon: In developing our project, we spoke about the relationship between embodiment and community, which has come to define two sides of the project. Can you elaborate your interest in embodiment? What has led you to focus on this in your work?

Jill: My interest in embodiment and the body is motivated by a need to understand the ways our bodies differentiate our experiences, through our sex, gender, age, ethnicity, and dis/ability and so on. What might be called our corpo-reality. Such differentiation matters in every sense of the word, because it places every body in a web of power relations that create the possibilities and constraints for action in the world. I think artistic practices have always been an important site for illuminating the power relations through which bodies move, by reinforcing and challenging the constraints for action.

Through my writing and creative practice issues of gender and various forms of dis/ability have been a consistent focus. I am interested in finding new ways to talk about the body that don't reinforce traditional dichotomies which split the self or the mind from the body, or make the body a generalized object.

I am interested instead of looking at the body more as a process, as something porous. Lisa Blackman sums it up when she says, "The body is not bounded by the skin, ... rather our bodies always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non human". Bruno Latour calls the body an interface, Eugene Gendlin conceptualizes it as an "interacting", such ideas form the foundation for my work and hope will be the starting point for the work in the Social Acoustics project. Through asking questions about the body, the sonic body, or the performing body, what it is, how it is done and undone, how it might extend and connect to other bodies, to practices and technologies, I hope we can explore how artistic practices may produce different bodies and different possibilities for action in the world.

We have also spoken about the topic of community together, which is a contested term in academic discourse and everyday life. Can you say why you think it is important to use this term in the context of the social acoustics project?

Brandon: In recent years I have been focusing on creating situations that experiment with ways of sharing space, with reshaping forms of togetherness that may also speak towards contemporary experiences of displacement, insecurity. This extends from artistic work I am involved with to the organizing of projects with others as well as approaches to teaching – these become different contexts for working through togetherness as a type of socio-materiality: the forms of life that for myself become a framework for imagining otherwise.

Within this work I have been drawing from sound and listening – or I would say, that by focusing on sound and listening I was led to work in this direction, to approach more fully the relationalities that are so greatly defining life. Sound and listening are informing my practice by opening up as well as complicating how we might approach the question of being together. For myself, this leads to understanding community as being less about identity, and more about shared vitality – what Jean-Luc Nancy terms “passion”. I think we see the emergence of new types of community today, a new ontology of community, for instance in new social movements or networks of solidarity, which points towards Nancy’s notion, especially as a way of working through the new norm of displacement, this state of being unhomed.

In the context of the Social Acoustics project I would like to question what community may be for us today, what these new expressions of togetherness tell us, and how they force a reworking of what I may call “the distribution of the heard”.

One of the key terms or topics we have also spoken about that links together a diverse set of project partners is listening. I wonder how you understand listening – what can listening provide or enable?

Jill: I have always been drawn to people’s accounts of listening, particularly powerful experiences in relation to musical participation. I have been fascinated in finding out about people’s listening experiences, because there is so much we don’t know. My previous work has focused on people who are not included in the standard accounts of listening, so I have a wider agenda to challenge the idea of an ideal listener and question the nature of listening itself. This has certainly been shaped by my own experiences. My mum started to lose her hearing when I was a teenager, so my understanding of listening has developed through living with my mum’s deafness. Perhaps this experience more than any other brought the complexities and anomalies of hearing and listening into day-to-day life. I have come to understand that listening is more than auditory, and not confined to the ears, but is instead multi-modal, multi-sensory – it is not one directional but co-constitutive, a multi-dimensional form of comprehending.

So listening provides us with a way of giving attention, a mode of alertness, a way of taking notice and responding – as Bella Bathurst put it, “hearing gives us each other”. I am interested in exploring this, the ways listening gives us each other, as an active mode of joint attention, co-created and inter-subjective, where the boundaries of self and other may be challenged and redrawn.

Tell me about your habits of listening? Do you think listening changes across a life course?

Brandon: I follow very much your idea of listening as alertness, as a giving attention to others, as well as to oneself. I'm a great self-talker, and have this feeling that listening in this situation enables self-understanding, almost a performance of oneself – performance always needs an audience, a negotiation with an exterior – as well as a sounding out of possibilities. Speaking to myself is also about rehearsing possibilities, testing out the life of ideas, and how those ideas feel in the body as they resonate within the chest, the throat, as they vibrate the voice, and also as they reverberate in the world, echoing back in tones of possibility. I think of this as an extremely creative moment, maybe as something that captures the vitality of being as it searches for form, for materializing itself in language, voice, sound, echoes and reverberations. Listening in this way is extremely nurturing, inviting, empowering, engendering.

I like your suggestion about listening changing over time, over one's life course. There is that lovely voice piece by the artist Gerhard Rühm which is simply the act of exhaling and sounding a single breath. He has repeated the work throughout his life, and what he captures is how the breath has gotten weaker, raspier, and shorter over time. The aged voice is something we are more familiar with than aged listening, but I think it is very suggestive to consider, this ear that has held so many sounds over its lifetime.

Jill: Perhaps the aged listener, or how aging changes the way we listen in contemporary life, should be something we think about more often. We live in an era of sound saturation – everything around us makes sound from cars, computers and washing machines to the sound of the human voice and the world of sound emitting from our phones. The sheer bombardment of sounds in modern life George Prochnik calls an “environmental catastrophe”, one of many he believes is destroying our mental and physical health and our ability to live together.

I have also been wondering about how issues of technology loom large within contemporary discourses on listening. How do technologies impact on the way we listen?

Brandon: It is incredible the degree to which technologies lead to new sensorial and cognitive behaviors, new techniques of sensing and understanding. It is almost overwhelming to reflect upon all the small adjustments in behavior that may be said to emerge for instance with the introduction of the mobile phone, and which continues to impact the individual and social body. This becomes so evident when you witness a baby trying to suddenly tap every surface! As if the world is one large screen.

Returning to the understanding of listening as being not only about sound, but also about alertness, attention, empathy, attunement, as well as orientation, we might reflect upon what is happening to listening under the dominance of the tap or the click. Is listening also tapping and clicking? I've been interested to reflect upon contemporary listening behaviors through the notion of overhearing, as it feels to me that we are doing more overhearing than listening, or listening is now extremely conditioned by forms of capture that demand our attention to be always already elsewhere. Listening is therefore learning to contend with the other as no longer someone or something immediately nearby, or through a lens of colonial histories only, but the other as always another, and another, and another. This elaborated and complicated sociality of contemporary life seems therefore to require another form of

attention, alertness, orientation, which makes social acoustics a lively framework for digging into such complex matters.

Jill: You used the word “overwhelming” when you were talking about how new technologies have changed our sensorial and cognitive worlds, and it makes me think of how listening experiences overwhelm both positively and negatively, and how and why we may seek out ways of listening which flood one or more of the senses, such as when we use headphones.

Brandon: I wanted to also ask you about your experiences as a musician, as a guitar player, and how this relates to your academic research and activities. How does guitar playing affect your approach to research, and to methods of inquiry? And has academic research influenced your music?

Jill: My relationship with the guitar has certainly shaped me in many respects. I have always thought of guitar playing as very much a bodily practice, so it has been key in growing my interest in embodiment. For me, instruments have prosthetic qualities in the way they extend the body, and extend our consciousness, they allow us to be outside of ourselves.

Like most electric guitarists I was interested in finding a sound, a particular tone, through creating a particular feel in my playing. Exploring the relationship between “feel” as a quality of the sound, and sound as a quality of “feel” lead me to be interested in the tactile kinesthetic qualities of sound, and how we instinctively listen through the modalities of touch and movement. This has driven some of my compositional work for dance and film where I have worked with different choreographers to explore what I describe as the physio-sonic qualities of sound and the relationship between sound, motion and emotion. I think it has always propelled me to write about how sounds are connected to the body and perceived by the body.

If I remember correctly, you also were a drummer? Does drumming remain connected to your practice and work?

Brandon: I think your sense for the tactile kinesthetic qualities of sound is something that I also carry with me, something embedded in why I’ve been so drawn to sound and listening as both philosophical and artistic frameworks – or as you say, “propelled” to also write about and think through sound as the basis for types of movement. I think what we are pointing at is the figuring of another type of paradigm, one that is extremely dynamic in terms of moving across both theory and practice, or what a friend recently referred to as: “from reasoning to resonating”. And of course, back again. I tried to elaborate this recently in the book *Sonic Agency*, reflecting on the ways in which individuals and communities capture or construct new agential positions through sound and listening. These tactile kinesthetic qualities of sound, which I also experienced through drumming, and which I feel provided me with a form of education, especially in the context of rock clubs and the small family that is the band, these qualities find other expressions in everyday life, through forms of minor acoustic practices. This is very much how I’m understanding “social acoustics”, as a means for engaging those practices by which people rework the distribution of the heard and seek out other forms of orientation.

Maybe we can elaborate social acoustics according to different acoustical relationalities or dynamics, such as the near and the far, the intimate and the quiet, or the interruptive – can we map out such acoustical conditions or frameworks and how they affect or shape experiences of sociality?

Jill: Yes, I like that idea, because I think it allows more productive ways of understanding how listening allows an expansion of bodily felt space, and a “being-outside-oneself” as Gernot Böhme puts it. In this sense frameworks of resonance, of timbre, or near and far as you suggest, may provide interesting ways to capture the fluidity of interrelation which go beyond the usual boundaries and open to more ecological forms of knowledge. This might relate to the paradigm shift you were mentioning, where we might move between and through theory and practice, to map out a unique epistemic liminal space between.