

# I See You Listening

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## Headphone Singing

Put on a pair of headphones  
not attached to a playback device  
and  
sing at the top of your voice.<sup>1</sup>

Try to perform this text score in a gallery or museum. Note the stares of the other visitors and experience the embarrassed self-consciousness as the security guard taps you on the shoulder and warns you to stop at once.

After receiving this warning, the girl went to the lavatory where she could be alone, for she felt quite shaken. She examined herself mechanically in the mirror above the filthy hand basin that was badly cracked and full of hairs: the image of her own existence. The dark, tarnished mirror scarcely reflected any image. Perhaps her physical existence had vanished? This illusion soon passed and she saw her entire face distorted by the tarnished mirror; her nose had grown as huge as those false noses made of papier mâché donned by circus clowns.<sup>2</sup>

This distortion heralds the outcome of the story and the future of “the girl” in Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*. Foretelling her life in the image of a cracked mirror, casting no reflection but showing her existence in a monstrous form.

What is the image of sound’s own existence? What tarnished mirror reflects the act of our listening when there is nothing to see but the technology of audition: the headphones that enable the hearing of works which remain unseen but whose invisible expanse distorts our existence as the certainty of what surrounds us becomes tarnished with their concealed sounds. Just like the girl’s appearance, sound’s appearance too is monstrous, vampiric. It casts no reflection in the lavatory mirror but distorts and changes how we see the world. And “she reckoned that it might not be such a bad thing being a vampire, for the blood would add a touch of pink to her sallow complexion.”<sup>3</sup>

Sound works, particularly those played on headphones, exhibit a certain vampirism and have the potential to add a “touch of pink” to the museum walls. To distort its certain appearance, the value and convention of its organization, and to add a clownish papier-mâché nose. This is not a trivial suggestion or a joke. This clown is not a jester but a serious curatorial strategy of introducing a performative action to achieve a different engagement. In this instance it is the action of listening on headphones in a public space that is traditionally focused on looking, that opens the normative situation of the museum to another experience. This is the experience of the invisible, of what is not in the room to be seen, and what thereby escapes the conventional curatorial project but “taints” its environment nevertheless. In that sense, the “clownery” of headphone listening to works that find no reflection in the mirror of the museum is a subversive move. It questions the norms of looking at art, as well as the newer convention of the audio guide, by being on headphones the art itself. This curatorial device is not carnivalesque however.<sup>4</sup> It does not inverse the museum’s situation into an anti-museum: a

museum of not looking and not collecting work. Instead it expands what we think we see through an unseen sound. Thus it expands what the museum is, what it can hold, what it can display, and how it collects and mediates works.

In this sense, this curatorial “clowning” is a critical strategy rather than an act of simple foolery, dispelling a derogative reading. Its criticality lies in rephrasing our engagement with the museum, its collecting and canon-forming drive, without slipping into an anti-nomic logic. And so it preserves the architectural form but unbends expectations of engaging with work and with the institution, that of the museum and that of sound art; and it re-performs the notion of a collective artistic appreciation by listening together on separate sets.

According to Paul Routledge, “the practices of clowning (and elements of other forms of physical theatre)” are a form of subversive performance that enables commitment and participation and motivates people to take “responsibility as an act of self-constitution.”<sup>5</sup> In the context of the museum, the art gallery, or the concert hall, such a subversive performance enables the act of constituting not only of the audience member, as a self-constitution of the art subject, but also of sound art and the museum, performing a reconstituting of the art object and its infrastructure: the exhibition, its collection and values as well as its production and reception mechanisms are being challenged in relation to expectations and norms.

Routledge talks about the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) and their appearances as political activists at, among others, G8 protests, where they perform “a series of somatic practices—manoeuvres, games, mimicry—that disrupt the ‘spirit’ of the protest event” and instead produce “a sensuous solidarity and ethical spectacle.”<sup>6</sup> Pursuing his observations into the art world, I understand that the criticality of collective headphone listening in the context of the museum disrupts the “spirit” of the visual display as well as

of more standardized sound art exhibitions and concerts. Instead it enables the solidarity of our participation as performers: listening, walking, singing even, quietly and aloud, while together ensconced in separate ear cushions. And it enables an ethics of participation, a sense of listening as doing, as a responsible act of engagement that creates a sensuous solidarity not justified by the museum or any musical or artistic register, but by listening itself.

In this sense, listening is the first focus of sound art. Not what it plays—which is concealed by technology and cultural entrainment, as well as by canonical expectations and hierarchies of production—but what I see you do, the same as me but different: moving with headphones in a contingent engagement that in its form is shared, but that each generates a different heard. And so listening is what I participate in, with my own headphones, walking and singing at the top of my voice. This listening compels me into a collective performance that disrupts the visual display. It creates ethical spectacles that oblige the responsibility of engagement and do not show the illusion of the real but “demonstrate the reality of their own illusions.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the spectacles of a collective performance of headphone listening do not support a normative view, the expected mechanisms of the artistic display and the conventional audition of its content. Instead, they offer physical and somatic insights into the production of a different possibility, a seeming illusion of the immaterial that is however real. Thus they reveal another vista, another state of actuality, freed from instituted conventions and an expecting ear. And they invent how else we might be able to be, act and inter-act, with work, with each other, and with the world, in the space of cracked mirrors and vanished reflections: “For she gave the impression of having no blood unless a day might come when she might have to spill it.”<sup>8</sup>

The liquid of her blood once spilt does not reflect like light. It does not replicate itself the same but “upon encountering an obstacle

breaks up and moves outwards in different directions.”<sup>9</sup> Her blood does not retain its shape and does not produce one difference, but shatters into plural forms and different directions. And so it cracks the certainty of appearance, of Lispector’s girl and of the sound art work, heard invisibly on headphones, to create plural difference moving centrifugally on diverse tracks.

Karen Barad refers to the comparison between light and fluids when discussing the diffractive optics developed by mid-seventeenth-century scientist Francesco Maria Grimaldi, whose work reframes a geometrical optics, based on reflection and refraction, through the observation of light through a two-slit pinhole. In his experiment, the differing light patterns diffuse boundaries, so that “bands of light appear inside the shadow region,” “queering” the binary of dark and light, and serving as a metaphor for a nonbinary difference that does not replicate but interferes.<sup>10</sup>

Barad gives an explanation of this “diffraction as the effect of differences,” as the effect of the different path lengths of a light to a particular point.<sup>11</sup> In this way she articulates difference not as simple difference of “not that,” but as patterns of difference that diffract and create a reflection that does not replicate, that does not behave the same, but generates “the patterns of difference that make a difference.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Donna Haraway, this different difference does not fit existing taxonomies or maps, the infrastructures that protect the illusions of reality. Instead, it makes new patterns that interfere with givens, expectations, and norms. It is not fixed in difference but shows its effects.

Diffraction does not produce “the same” displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction.

A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of difference appear. Tropically, for the promises of monsters, the first invites the illusion of essential, fixed position, while the second trains us to more subtle vision.<sup>13</sup>

Sound work is waves that behave like liquid and follow the optics of diffraction into the diffuse shadow of the unseen, where we require the subtler vision of the monstrous that moves without reflection. These waves break apart and disrupt the museum and the concert hall, creating interference with a “touch of pink” without negating the architectural space.

The exhibition of sound work with the playful curatorial device of headphones has the potential to produce this interference through participation and responsibility. And thus it has the potential to make the effects of difference audible without realigning them with or against the same. Moving instead into different patterns of articulation, which invisibly manifest the infinite plurality of sound’s realities that do not replicate and thus do not confirm the taxonomical canons of art or of music, but have the emancipatory power to move outward, in different directions, free from historical givens to map rather than follow the map.

And so sound art that performs the patterns of diffraction does not seek to refract as repeat, but opens upon a nonbinary diversity that is potentially endless. It sounds the possibility of art as “a threading through of an infinity of moments-places-matterings, a superposition/entanglement, never closed, never finished.”<sup>14</sup> The headphones enable this superposition of entanglements by presenting simultaneously a plurality of works. Next to each other, filling the room and filling time inaudibly, without canceling each other out. They have the potential to present plural histories without the exclusions of a hierarchical thread. And they avoid a

single reflection, as they avoid the foregrounding of a curatorial selection: the playing of the right work, and the right sounds, and the fulfilling of historical expectation to make the future of sound art based on the value of a singular past. The headphones do not make a canonical formation or a chronological line out of invisible strands of sound. Instead, they enable our joint performance and create, at least in my imagination, a sense of inexhaustibility: hinting at an infinite production whose selection is contingent, fluid, potentially changing, and being added to continually. Including in its playlists all the works that could be included, even those we do not yet know.

The fact that we are unable to listen to all the works presented in the exhibition means that we can imagine our own choices as part of the selection, playing at this moment in somebody else's ears. The sheer number of works counteracts the idea of completeness and comprehension and invites a listening to everything, the audible and the as yet unheard. In that sense the exhibition as headphone performance re-navigates the sense of the canon as a singular history and bounded geography that legitimizes the validity and worth of sound art. Instead, the simultaneity of works blurs boundaries and asks for their legitimacy in our listening, together but separate, creating a diffractive movement, outward, in all directions.

In this way sound unbends curatorial authority. Challenging the curator as singular bestower of value and worth, as it foregrounds the care of the curatorial process to be done by all: to take care and listen, to be curious, to expand one's ears and lean into the audible to hear more and different works. And like the Rebel Army and their appearances as political activists, listening we too form a rebel army that hears the illusion of the real and topples it through the collective performance of infinite sonic possibilities that are the reality of their own illusions. And so we avoid the value of a simple reflection and engage in the infinity of a plural song.

If I do not succeed in toppling  
 this tower in reality's citadel,  
 I will sing down to the stars from heaven  
 as no one else has ever done.  
 I will sing so that my longing ceases,  
 longing that never has known rest,  
 that it might push the lyre aside  
 as if the song's task were at an end.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Headphone Singing," June 10, 2019, [www.soundwords.tumblr.com](http://www.soundwords.tumblr.com).

<sup>2</sup> Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 1992), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Routledge, "Sensuous Solidarities: Emotion, Politics and Performance in the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army," *Antipode* 44, no. 2 (2012): 433.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>8</sup> Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 170.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Barad, interviewed in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 300.

<sup>14</sup> Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction," 169.

<sup>15</sup> Edith Södergran, "Revanche" (1918), in *Complete Poems*, trans. David McDuff (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), 104. Reproduced with permission from the publisher and the translator David McDuff.