

SOUND DRAWS US TOGETHER

Irene Revell and Sarah Shin in Conversation with Klara du Plessis

Klara du Plessis, Irene Revell, Sarah Shin

*Irene Revell is a researcher and curator, lecturing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Co-Leading the Scoring Warnings AHRC research project at CRiSAP, University of the Arts London. Sarah Shin is one of the co-founders of Silver Press, a feminist publishing venture also based in London, U.K., featuring international authors and artists, as well as a wide array of hybrid approaches to book-making. Together, Revell and Shin co-edited an expansive collection of over fifty contributions centring feminist sonic cultures and radical listening practices, *Bodies of Sound: Becoming a Feminist Ear* (Silver Press, 2024). These contributions span a wide range of materials, letters, excerpts, poems, philosophical provocations, listening exercises, performance documentation, and much more, intersecting with an intellectual or scholarly mindset without feeling institutionally discernible or bound. The versatility of the materials compiled here generate a sense of liveness, a feeling of sound enacting itself rather than being reified into a representation of itself. Or as Shin suggests, “Sound can be displayed (without making it static) by making it felt.” Klara du Plessis talks to Revell and Shin about their project of creating an affective space where sound can resonate thematically, but also as physical bodies of sound in conceptual allusion to its own status as signal. Simultaneously, the wide variety of contributions harmonise to produce a collective community space in the pages of the book. After all, as Revell notes, “it is sound that draws us together into relation.”*

Klara:

Irene, Sarah, you are the editors of the fantastic new collection of essays, artist’s statements, provocations, dialogues, scores, and more, *Bodies of Sound: Becoming a Feminist Ear*. Congratulations! I’ll return to the “feminist ear,” which is such an evocative and relevant formulation, but first, I’m curious to hear about the backstory that brought this collection into being, the process of its formulation, perhaps even your friendship.

Sarah:

Friendship is such an important part of anything I do or want to do. Our mutual friend Aura Satz introduced us when I was researching Pauline Oliveros for what would become *Quantum Listening* (now published in a new edition by Spiral House — a new imprint from Silver Press — with Aura’s *Tuning Fork Spells*), but I had known about and admired Irene and her work with Electra, *Her Noise* and *Womens Work* for some years before that. [1] On a sunny day, we sat gathering freckles outside Cafe Oto, which would become the book’s spiritual home. Five years later, we had our first conversation about the book there in November 2024, and most of the following meetings.

Irene:

Sarah knew I had previously worked with Pauline Oliveros in a feminist context a much older exhibition and archival project called *Her Noise* that I'd been engaged with since 2004, including overseeing its archiving — to celebrate the donation of the archive (to UAL Archives and Special Collections) we organised a symposium and performance programme in 2012 at Tate Modern, where we invited Pauline to be the keynote speaker and to perform.

But going back to 2004, I was coming out of more of a DIY punk scene in my 20s where politics was never far away and sort of took for granted that the *Her Noise* project was afforded funding and space; at the time I had no real conception of how hard the two curators I was working for, Lina Džuverorić and Anne Hilde Neset, had had to push to even secure the exhibition's single venue, South London Gallery (when in fact it was supposed to be a touring exhibition but no other venue in the UK would commit). [2] I think it's fair to say that at that point, neither feminisms nor sound and sound arts were at all *cool topics* in the artworld, or any more mainstream context, making it somehow doubly difficult. Feminist struggles, cultures, history was passé, evoking “a hag as well as a nag”, as Sara Ahmed has it in her essay in the book; [3] and *sound* totally geeky, obscure, maybe deemed not real art nor music; and at least another decade before academic *sound studies* would emerge, for better or worse.

Contrarily, I was evangelical about both; and all the more so their coming together. And a lot of my own curatorial work over the intervening years has circled these intersecting topics. Especially in questions of form, structure, infrastructure — all-the-more so once I had discovered Pauline Oliveros' philosophy of sound and listening, originally termed Sonic Awareness, later Deep Listening — which began as an intrinsically feminist enquiry with the formation of [Oliveros'] Womens Ensemble that met weekly at her home in San Diego in the very early 1970s, essentially what she recounts to Kate Millet in 1973 in the letter we've published in this book. [4]

But that's all to say that while the book came together relatively fast, Sarah and I already had a shared dialogue on these topics; for me, it was drawing on a central strand of my interests over the last twenty years or more. And so the book seeks to both reflect on some of these early interventions like Oliveros and more recent forerunners like Tara Rodgers (whose Pink Noises project was contemporaneous with the development of *Her Noise* at the turn of the Millennium), but equally to reflect what is actually a really quite new and exciting area of confluences in recent writings and continue to open up this area in a way that is both speculative and grounded.

Sarah:

The book is deeply imprinted by the context of its inception, as we were beginning to witness the renewed escalation of genocide in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine in the wake of Covid, and before that too. In early 2022, I was working on preparing

Quantum Listening for its first publication when Russia invaded Ukraine. In IONE's introduction, she talks about listening to the sounds of war coming from her television — that they are the antithesis of Pauline's intention for the world. At the same time, IONE is listening to the mechanical sounds of a bridge being repaired near her home. She listened to the jackhammers and the sounds of war simultaneously and wrote: "As I listen, the sounds of war are not eradicated, but some despair in me — and in the world at large, perhaps — is lifting. More energy is made available for harmonious action, whether emanating from body or mind." [5] In this context, the body and its vulnerability, sovereignty and fungibility seemed central within a matrix of questions around listening, sound, and feminism.

Klara:

You've generously gestured to the clear relational influences of this book project and to some of the pivotal individuals involved in the process. I would now like to flag the sonic dimension of the book. In your collaborative introduction, you suggest that "*Bodies of Sound* is a book of echoes: mirrors, bells, tongues, doors, clocks, radios, archives, alarms and ears." [6] What strategies did you follow to amplify that sense of reverberating sound and liveness, even as the book functions as an archive of sorts?

Sarah:

The texts arrived to us full of reverberation already and the book serves as a container within which the voices amplify each other. A book will always be received, activated, and made meaningful by the act of reading, but this inherently relational quality of a book seems to have become a particular attribute of *Bodies of Sound*, among the contributions and also with its readers. Indeed, we titled our introduction "a book of echoes" referring to Annie Goh's essay contribution that considers the echo in sonic knowledge production. [7]

Irene:

One of the most important areas to explore with the book was the relationship between voice, speaking, recording and text; in other words, the question of what sound and listening do to writing. It was crucial to us to ask what forms the written word could take in this context, whether that's through writings that emerge from audio and speech, dialogues, interview — or text scores that seek to iteratively produce performances by others.

Klara:

The book includes a substantial range of entries from scholars, authors, and artists, such as Anne Bourne, Gascia Ouzounian, Pauline Oliveros, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and so many more. Some of these contributors have current, active creative and critical practices and others have already passed away. Instead of ordering their entries by subject or chronology, for example, you have ordered

them in alphabetical order based on their given names: Gascia before Theresa, and not Cha before Ouzounian. This offers a sense of immediacy, of closeness, of familiarity. To what extent were you trying to create a community in these pages? And how might that feed into the feminist project of the work?

Irene:

Here we wanted to make a collection of elements that might not otherwise come together, that also feels potentially more ephemeral in a live or sounding way too; texts that only exist online or in a zine or entirely unpublished; or indeed in a more immediate sense as audio form in a podcast or recorded talk. We eschewed asking for excerpts from, for example, books that are already widely known and in good circulation just for the sake of inclusion or some kind of fantasy of completeness.

This immediately touches on probably our biggest challenge, which was how to order such a book, each contribution having multiple multivalent dialogic connections with many others, for a myriad of different formal, topical and other reasons. At the outset we had some probably quite obvious and loose headings ('the voice', 'the archive' etc.) to start to gather names or texts under, really just to aid brainstorming. But quickly, and happily, these categories started to break down and fall away — which is perhaps the best thing we could have hoped for — to avoid this rigid fixity.

A recent review criticised the 'lack of ordering' as a lazy move. It certainly wasn't lazy. Once we had the contributions gathered, I spent far too long with flashcards, and then software (Miro), trying to re-introduce some kind of sections for the book, mainly for a simple desire to break the book down into shorter parts that one might conceivably read in one go. It took this futile effort to reinforce what is actually a deep-seated suspicion of these kinds of categories or neat ways of canonising, tied more personally with the fact I think neither of us are 'linear' thinkers or writers ourselves.

One of the most influential texts for me, as a curator working with history, that I have come back to time and again is artist film maker Lis Rhodes' "Whose History." [8] In my favourite part she orders one to "[c]ut the line and chronology falls in a crumpled heap. I prefer history crumpled at my feet not stretched above my head." And I think that metaphor of the crumpled heap rather than the neat line above is what we're grappling with here.

Coming back specifically to the question of ordering: ordering by name was a response to the conventional anthology move of ordering by year, which didn't really make sense here, as there was such a focus on contemporary writing, the idea of a chronology isn't so much at play. We chose to do it by first name I think because it felt more playful, resisting the formality of surnames. But also simply because we tried that first and it immediately threw up some lovely and unexpected juxtapositions, producing one of many potential sets of resonances through these adjacencies, that really affirmed everything we could have hoped for. While there are nevertheless some very distinct strands in the book (for

example, we brought one of them out for our second launch event at Cafe OTO in London, in terms of the sound archive, recording and history), we hope the texts are in a cacophonous dialogue both with each other but of course the reader, and with hopefully much more writing to come.

Klara:

The editorial process you describe is, of course, a form of curatorial labour; that said, this book is not primarily about curation. It intertwines sound, curatorial, editorial, pedagogical...practices in and beyond the immediate context. What is the relationship between the curatorial as a conceptual field of knowledge production and the editorial labour of constructing a book such as *Bodies of Sound*?

Sarah:

We have found that *Bodies of Sound* is really a starting point for more listening, gathering, resonance, conversation, and playing. As we were finalising editing, we felt the project would continue, being more oriented towards inclusion rather than exclusion. We were also making sense of what the book became and is becoming: that it is a community, a curatorial project, and we're still figuring out how to 'play' the book with people inside and outside of the book's covers who want to explore some of the questions we posed. My publishing has been very much about creating constellations and communities: it's difficult to separate the process of making books from other explorations of ideas and forms through and beyond the book.

Irene:

I think there is also a central locus around artistic practice; the book brings together a number of practices that might also exist together in similar constellations in a different format, e.g. performance, exhibition. In this sense, I would say it's a curatorial project that takes the format of an anthology book. Or to put it another way, we came to the contributions on a curatorial basis more than a scholarly one.

Klara:

I love this idea of a versioned curation, one that takes on different forms, opens up to various material possibilities, but also coheres as an edited collection.

Your title *Bodies of Sound* holds a similar tension to the one that Jason [Camlot] and I are also grappling with in this special issue of *Amodern*, "Affective Signals: Sounding the Curatorial." That is, how does materiality (bodies) and ephemerality (sound) interrelate? Especially when thinking in terms of curation or editorial labour, where material conditions of display or public-making are often central concerns, how can sound be made present? Can sound be displayed? Or to qualify that, can sound be displayed without rendering it static?

Sarah:

Very early on, I asked Irene, who trained in physics: what is sound, exactly?

Irene:

Yes, that part of me wants to qualify that sound is a form of energy moving through vibrating particles (usually air particles, in the case of human hearing). So that's a fairly dispersed body of particles in contrast with our own denser and more contained body of particles that is somewhat more complex, organic, though largely water and lipids if you think of the cellular level... In the context of, say, the particle physics that Rasheedah Phillips and Karen Barad are drawing from (that looks at sub-atomic particles), sound moving through the air and encountering our own human bodies are all operating at roughly the same macro scale. [9]

I have been very drawn to Salomé Voegelin's notion of "curating volumes" that she discusses in her penultimate book, *The Political Possibility of Sound*. [10] That is to say that listening more attentively in gallery space, and specifically, the operation of sounding works, gives us a broader understanding of these spaces as *volumes* that hold the works and us, the public in this *viscid* sense where all these elements are in touch with each other. For me this really foregrounds the time-basis of exhibition-making and leans towards the social quality of listening together; I've started to think about the *live social volume* as a curatorial format for working with sound and other live media. In relation to the physics, I think what I'm trying to say here is that potentially it is sound that draws us together into relation with each other and any other elements, including artworks.

Sarah:

Sound can be displayed (without making it static) by making it felt. Feeling can expand knowledge and experience beyond ocularcentrism and positivism, in an epistemic sense, and it is an invitation to rethink established roles and positions, in a social sense. I am curious about how sound reflects or suggests something about our own perception: there's so much going on we are not consciously aware of, but which we are picking up on in our perceptual field. Listening as practice, or even activism, asks us to be open to how things arrive and how things are, beyond our thoughts and pre-established ideas about how they should be or what we think they are. If you 'tune in', it's possible to notice more in the interconnected fabric of all things — you have a wider and more refined, subtler perceptual range. This 'ephemeral' dimension is connected with material phenomena (sometimes through synchronicity and quantum entanglement), which is a part of what I think we wanted to allude to with the title 'bodies of sound'. The 'body' extends beyond the material to subtle bodies, and the individual to the collective.

Sound not only encompasses all of this in human experience, but in many traditions, is cosmogonic. Today, scientists think that the primordial hum that may have followed the big bang has left sonic imprints in the matter of the universe. Are we all fossilised echoes from the start of the universe? What if art-

making or sound-making is not for the purposes of display within an arbitrary economic system against life, but as a part of cosmic forces of creation and decay? Through listening together, sound enables experiencing beyond the construction of the individual, and is therefore rich with ethical and spiritual possibility.

Klara:

“It is sound that draws us together into relation with each other and any other elements.” “Sound can be displayed (without making it static) by making it felt.” I’ll be quoting the two of you in the introduction! Your words function as a thesis statement for this special issue.

The physical manifestation of sound that you describe here, both in relation to its scientific processes, and the visceral and affective bodily responses to it, links to your book’s subtitle, gleaned from Sara Ahmed’s transcribed talk, “Feminist Ears.” Here she defines a feminist ear as “a method,” as giving “complaints somewhere to go [...] To become a feminist ear is not only to be willing to receive complaints but to make use of them, to make them part of our work.” [11] She writes from a context of institutional, sexual violence. I’m struck, though, by the implication that a “complaint” is also a sounding that is emitted, received, and activated. By applying Ahmed’s term to the larger collection, how do you resonate with her definition and how do you expand upon, perhaps even depart from it?

Sarah:

The metonymic embodiment of feminist practice as an ear is interesting because its labyrinthine shape is almost mirrored in Sara’s style of repetition and circling, which surfaces what has been latent and allows it to be heard. Here, speech both invokes and is met by a material counterpart in the door; the recurrence — echoes — of the door retrieves something forgotten. She says: “Sometimes, we can only hear something in our own story when we share it with someone else.”

Irene:

For me, the crucial point in her [Ahmed’s] text is two-fold, that the *feminist ear*, the listening she is advocating is both *shared*, i.e. a collective activity — this is something touched on in numerous contributions in the book, I hope galvanised in this text — but also that this listening is a site of action, of collective *work*; that to me is really really crucial. Not only emitted and received, but *activated*. That circuit being joined is everything: remembering this and somehow fighting our dreadful atomisation.

Klara:

Maybe I can also drop in some further references from the book to Carson Cole Arthur, Petero Kalulé, and A.M. Kanngieser who propose the notion of “Abolitionary Listening” (57-66); Cathy Lane writes about “Listening Back” (67-69); Christina Hazboun contextualises “Sonic Strategies in the Palestinian

Struggle” (70-77). [12] There are more examples. I’m wondering about the resistant potential inherent to feminist, embodied, queer, and decolonial listening practices in your conceptualisation of this book. How might we direct our attention differently, especially in the current political moment we collectively live in?

Sarah:

I think this takes us back to the centrality of Oliveros to all of this: hers and IONE’s dedication of their art, philosophy, and collective practice to peace and the elimination of the need or desire for violence. The autonomic nervous system regulates our responses to stress; listening can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, in which a greater sense of safety and connection can be experienced — this state of the body is the ground for a different way of being social.

In Ursula K. Le Guin’s novella *The Word for World is Forest*, she writes about a pacifist dreaming culture, the Athsheans, who live on the planet Athshe. [13] To resolve a conflict, instead of fighting they practice competitive singing (which can stimulate the vagus nerve), but they wage violent resistance against their colonisers, the human Terrans. It seemed like an interesting example of where sound can play a role in society, and specifically conflict, so that the activation of the fight-or-flight response can be more intentionally directed. Hannah Catherine Jones also brings together politics with healing and sonic frequency in their contribution, and through their singing with the Chiron Choir, with collective voice.

Klara:

This “collective voice” and the generosity and scope of contributions mean that there are many different formal modes present in the larger book. In “Sounding Gaps in Pavements,” the republished prologue to Salomé Voegelin’s incisive *Uncurating Sound*, she describes “your ear in my voice [...] my desire to collaborate: to find my voice in reading yours aloud.” [14] She is expressing the interconnection of sounding and listening, and the value of collective thinking and voicing as part of a larger project on art and politics, but she is also creating a vivid poetic image, one which gently shifts her scholarly writing into the terrain of creative expression. How do you see this interdisciplinary method as expanding what is possible under the rubric of scholarship? Or do you even conceive of this book as scholarly?

Sarah:

We explicitly did not intend the book to be scholarly — or rather, we were thinking more about the academic, as Irene reminds me — partly because Annie Goh’s engagement with situated knowledges is more resonant (rather than the implicit objectivity of much academic discourse), but moreover, the enormous range of potential inclusions would have made it impossible. The book was always going to

be partial and influenced by the particular moment of its formation and our own pathways to it, hence the book is populated by people whose practices we admire, that have been influential on us, and that we intuit connections between. It's not very logical: it's arranged alphabetically because the default organisation of A-Z was the way to free us from imposing a different order that would have fallen short of a collection of voices that is louder than the sum of its parts (to add to what we've already discussed in terms of categories and ordering).

Irene:

In particular, we were distancing the collection from conventional academic writing that is *about*, but does not engage formally in, what it is grappling with — so here Salomé's text is a great example of something that counters that (that is bona fide academic, Bloomsbury etc., but equally attempts to disrupt that in its form as much as the questions it is asking). Though ironically, the review in the *Wire* by Abi Bliss said that “neither campus nor gallery is far beyond earshot” — which I actually appreciate as true, and I think gets at your question here in that it is trying to grapple with questions such as knowledge production in relation to sound and the body; it is asking potentially abstract questions about the nature of listening, or how any of these things relate to artistic practices that are complex and rigorous in themselves. [15]

Sarah:

I'm thinking about Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Suzanne Kite's conversation in which Leanne talks about listening as the foundational Anishinaabe practice, about knowledge production. She shares a creation story where the Creator's first thoughts are the sound of seeds in a gourd, then the next sound was the heartbeat. Combined, Leanne says that they represent “intellectual thought and emotional thought combined, and then the whole universe gets created.” [16]

Klara:

How apt to end on the note of creation. I'd like to thank you both for taking the time to talk with me about *Bodies of Sound* and for putting this expansive collective work into the world! It is a text that I'll be returning to, and I'm sure it'll continue to be discovered by many other readers, scholars, and practitioners.

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1. Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening* (Spiral House, 2024). See hernoise.org. ↩
 2. Lina Džuverović, “Twice Erased: The Silencing of Feminisms in Her Noise,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 20 (2016): 88–95, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wam.2016.0005>. ↩
 3. Sara Ahmed, “Feminist Ears,” in *Bodies of Sound: Becoming a Feminist Ear*, eds. Irene Revell and Sarah Shin (London: Silver Press, 2024), 276–295. ↩
 4. Pauline Oliveros, “Letter to Kate Millet,” in *Bodies of Sound: Becoming a Feminist Ear*, eds.