

# To hear and being heard

A practice-based sound art research project

Morten Poulsen, May 2022

*Listening is, as all communication, trained. It is encultured and geographically specific, shaped by social, political and economic forces, violence and oppression. Despite this, it is expected that we listen in universal ways. The fallacy of this is clear when you consider that even though we assume we listen carefully, being unheard, misheard or misunderstood is a common complaint.*

- AM Kanngieser<sup>1</sup>

As part of the program *Enhanced Practice* at the International Center for Knowledge in the Arts (Copenhagen, DK), I carried out a short practice-based artistic research project which explored listening and *being heard*<sup>2</sup>. The project reflects my desire to critically investigate different understandings of listening, its uses, misuses, and potentialities in relation to social change in the face of contemporary challenges.

For this work, I organized and facilitated participatory activities in order to collectively question our listening: how we listen, what we listen for, how it feels to be listened to, and what it feels like to be heard. Together, we staged conversations and worked through other forms of doing things with sound: making *unintentional* sounds with sound-making objects and with our eyes closed; making private sounds that were only for oneself to hear, "sharing the stage" through collective improvisations and making music that was focused less on the sounds than on the pauses and on



anticipation. Additionally, we experimented with listening through touch.

Most of the activities took place inside and around the House of Ears: a small makeshift space within a larger room<sup>3</sup> made from walls of thin and soft fabrics that moved in the faint push of air produced whenever a body was moving alongside it. I had created this space to invite and host the participants and our listening. In particular, reflecting on these collective sonic practices, we discussed the notion of *being heard* to describe the sensation of being acknowledged, and what kind of listening that *being heard* asks for. As we tried to describe to each other the elements of *being heard*, it became apparent that this sensation is hard to explain in words but very recognisable as a feeling.

These elements; the House of Ears, our listening and sound-making together, and our collective conversations, instigated our discussions on what listening is and what it is for.

In the article *Listening, Thinking, Being* (2010), Lispeth Lipari explores a perspective on listening which the author calls *listening being*. Lipari writes:

*"... in listening being I come to the conversation empty - not empty of experience or history - but empty of the belief that my experience or history define the limits of possible meaning and experience. Thereby, in listening being I am being empty of possession and of all intentions other than the intention of engagement with you and of the what-will-happen."* - Lispeth Lipari, p. 355

What I understand from this quote, is the importance of an awareness of my own limitations as a listener; limitations that are shaped by my specific background and history, and that position me in relation to the world. In relation to this, in her text, Lipari describes listening as simultaneously an invitation and hosting of the other. As I have experienced in my project, this listening-as-hosting can trigger a variety of reactions, from awkwardness and embarrassment to laughter and empowerment. I understand that it is in these reactions that a transformational potential of listening can be found, as we no longer merely *hear* (as in passively perceive sound) but also,

through our emotional engagement, start to *belong to* and *become the heard*<sup>4</sup>. I believe that experiencing this kind of listening might enable us to develop our sense of involvement and interconnection, because it demands of the listener an awareness of their own specific background; a sensitivity as a host to the other; and a cultivation of a sense of *belonging to* the heard. For my work, I understand these aspects as central to developing a practice of listening that includes an acknowledgement of the heard; that is a listening that cultivates *being heard*.

Experiences of listening, as experiences *with* listening, and particularly *with* listening together, as we practised them in my project, reveal how different people listen: how it at once depends on and reveals their position: their biography, their sense of self in relation to normativity, and their orientation. Thus it makes us aware that we do not experience the world the same way. This insight, reached through practice and in the context of Lipari and Kanngieser, complexifies our understanding of listening and its uses beyond a simple reception of listening as a means to understand social relations and positionalities. On this background, my work is motivated to question the expectations that listening happens in universal ways or that listening is universally good. Instead, we are not all heard in equal ways, as one participant of my project came to vocalize after a collective listening exercise. The sense of *being heard*, as we practised in my project,

heightens our sensitivity towards what it means *not* to be heard, it outlines the limitations of our own listening abilities, and points out the effect that our individual self-conceptions have on what we hear.

There is, it appears, more listening taking place than ever, and in multiple forms: marketed as *social listening*, companies track user-data across social media platforms with the purpose of developing brands and target ads<sup>5</sup>. Governments “eavesdrop” on data, messages, and phone calls from their allies<sup>6</sup> and citizens<sup>7</sup>. Always-on microphones and voice recognition software are built into smart devices, leading some technology companies to warn people not to talk about sensitive information in the vicinity of their products<sup>8</sup>. Microphones are placed deep in the ocean<sup>9</sup> and on Mars<sup>10</sup>, as scientists record, analyse and describe the world and other planets around us. There are well-meaning guides on how becoming a better listener can improve relationships<sup>11</sup> and how more effective listening can improve business<sup>12</sup>. Listening becomes a political device, as politicians establish citizens-councils while ultimately not being obliged to take a position on their proposals<sup>13</sup>. Microphones and digital recorders are becoming cheaper, and more musicians, sound artists and field recordists are recording ever more things, from the Greenlandic ice melting<sup>14</sup> to earth’s magnetic field<sup>15</sup>.

While a general understanding of listening might enable us to learn, understand and empathize with the world and others, listening might also happen from habitual thinking that reinforces categories and familiar structures, relying on the recognition of certain aspects and effectively ignoring others. A listening that only really hears what it expects to hear, you could say. In some of the cases mentioned above, listening or a stated interest in listening, risks becoming a decoy to create the appearance of attentiveness, that is ultimately diluted in the style of greenwashing; *listenwashing*. So I wonder why it is that, with all this listening going on, contemporary challenges such as the climate emergency, migration, public health issues, etc. still haven't been properly acted upon. From the experiences gathered through my project, I conclude that we don't need more listening in its general sense. Instead, I believe we need more of what Lipari calls *listening being*, and which in this project I call *being heard*.

Listening is trained, as Kanngieser, cited above, states. In my work with a socially engaged and participatory sound practice, I experience that *being heard* entrains a different attitude towards listening, in which the listener is urged to develop an awareness of their own position and privileges, of how they are being heard and how they are involved in what is and what is not being heard. Other projects of mine have similarly sought to create "training grounds" to untrain habits of listening in order to change our attitudes towards the

unheard and underrepresented<sup>16</sup>. When listening is then directed at the unheard or underrepresented, we can do this in a more *care-full* way. Rather than putting the responsibility to speak up on the shoulders of the unheard, or aesthetifying the unheard, a practice of *being heard* positions the responsibility on the shoulders of those who listen (or who should be listening).

Illuminating the scope of how habitual thinking affects our listening (including my own), and exploring how we can come to practice more *being heard*, will be a task that I will continue to investigate in my future work. Also, in further work I aim to pay attention to who it is that needs to *be heard* and who needs to listen. What I take from my project at this stage, is the effect of listening together and pondering over these questions as we listen. On that note, returning back to the particular experiences we had in the House of Ears, I will conclude this text with a few keywords that came up as some of the participants of my project discussed; what means *being heard*?

..... Generosity \_ empathy \_ enough space \_ enough time \_ attention \_ loss of oneself \_ trust \_ adjustment \_ love \_ affirmation \_ movement \_ a type of creation \_ a type of becoming \_ to let the world happen, and happen with the world \_ admission \_ vulnerability \_ devotion \_ experiencing oneself and more-selves \_ .....



## References:

- LISPETH LIPARI, *Listening, Thinking, Being*, - Communication Theory 20 (2010) 348-362.
- Michael Gallagher, *Listening, Meaning and Power* - On Listening, Uniformbooks 2013.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> AM Kanngieser, Critical Modes of Listening, CTM 2021: <https://youtu.be/kGe0DYMroEg?t=4102>

<sup>2</sup> The project took place through April and May 2022. The activities in the House of Ears took place April 4th-19th.

<sup>3</sup> I want to acknowledge the local context of the House of the Ear, the limitations of the project and my position within it: The project was located in one of the former stablehouses in the meatpacking district (built from 1878), that have since c. 2000 been housing creative businesses, galleries, artists studios and nightlife. On one side of the stablehouses is Øksnehallen, a large building that is used for conferences, fashion shows, exhibitions, etc. On the other side, within 100 meters, is the world's largest drug consumption room and the streets around it is used by socially vulnerable people, both for dealing with and taking drugs and for homeless people to shelter. The building in which the project took place is owned by the municipality as collective artist studio space of which I am part of. The project was not public and the participants were there by invitation.

<sup>4</sup> I do not hold the position that humans need to anthropomorphise, for example, another animal, as this only re-centers the human experience and neglects the autonomy of the other. Lipari describes being the listening host: "I don't have to translate your words into familiar categories or ideas. I don't have to "feel" what you feel, or "know" what it feels like to be you. What I do need to do is stand in proximity to your pain. To stand with you, right next to you, and to belong to you, fully present to the ongoing expression of you." - *Listening, Thinking, Being* p. 351

<sup>5</sup> "Social listening is the process of tracking mentions of certain words, phrases, or even complex queries across social media and the web, followed by an analysis of the data. ... The exciting thing about social media listening is that it gives you access to invaluable insights on your customers, market, and competition: think of it as getting answers to questions that matter to your business, but without having to ask the actual questions." - <https://martech.org/social-listening/>

<sup>6</sup> "Through targeted retrievals and the use of NSA-developed analysis software known as Xkeyscore, NSA intercepted both calls, texts and chat messages to and from telephones of officials in the neighbouring countries." - <https://>

[www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-security-agency-spied-merkel-other-top-european-officials-through-danish-2021-05-30/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-security-agency-spied-merkel-other-top-european-officials-through-danish-2021-05-30/)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/09/internet-of-things-smart-devices-spying-surveillance-us-government>

<sup>8</sup> Samsung SmartTV privacy policy, warning users not to discuss personal info in front of their TV - <https://twitter.com/xor/status/564356757007261696>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2022/02/07/its-time-to-listen-to-the-ocean-literally/?sh=7a34e07032af>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/jpl/hear-sounds-from-mars-captured-by-nasa-s-perseverance-rover>

<sup>11</sup> "How to Become a Better Listener" - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/how-do-life/201405/how-become-better-listener> <sup>12</sup> "5 Ways Listening Grows Your Business" - <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/249998>

<sup>13</sup> In 2020, Danish minister for Climate, Energy and Utilities Dan Jørgensen established a citizens' council that would provide solutions to address the climate crisis. However, the politicians are not obliged to consider the citizens' proposals. - <https://www.information.dk/indland/2020/06/kommer-danmarks-klimaborgerting-goere-bedre-klogere-siger-dan-joergensen>

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Kirkegaard, Isfald - <https://fonik.dk/works/isfald.html>

<sup>15</sup> Christian Skjødts Hasselstrøm, Beneath - <https://skjodt.net/beneath/>

<sup>16</sup> *The white voice* (2021), a participatory manuscript-performance for men to critically de-center their own voice, and *Ulydig* (2021), a series of workshops in which the participants were reflecting on community, gender and voice.

