

GAIL PRIEST

SonoLexic: *the language of listening*



an audio-text to accompany
the installation *SonoLexic*
Experimenta Make Sense 2017-2020

version 3A, June 2019
Plimsoll Gallery, UTAS

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Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, May 2018

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Introduction

“Thought is nested in speech not in texts, all of which have their meanings through reference of the visual symbol to the world of sound. What the reader is seeing on this page are not the real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound.”

Walter J Ong, 2005, Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Routledge, London, New York, p73

Language of Listening is an e-publication produced to compliment the installation *SonoLexic*, presented as part of **Experimenta Make Sense**, touring Australia 2017-2020.

The installation

SonoLexic is a sound driven installation that contemplates how we process the listening experience through language. It playfully proposes a variant of synaesthesia — an intimate cross-modal association of sound and words. It poses questions as to how language plays into the way we understand and communicate the listening experience and alternately how words can generate an imagined act of listening.

The physical manifestation of the work is a sculptural object comprising a suspended plasma tube showing scrolling texts and sonic visualisations, reminiscent of a hologram. The sound is delivered via nearfield speakers with the voice emanating from an ultrasonic speaker creating a tightly focussed beam of sound that the listener may discover by moving around the object.

For video documentation of the installation see <https://vimeo.com/236397733>

* *Headphone listening recommended.*

The publication

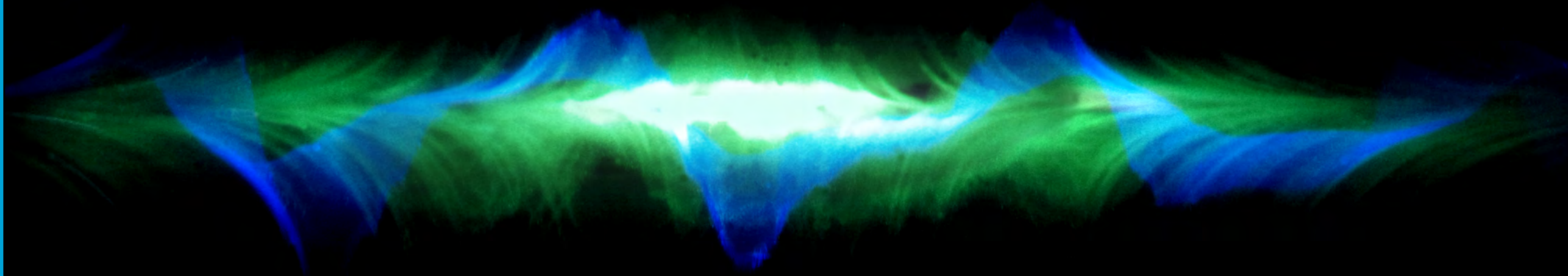
Chapter 1 introduces the ideas under consideration via an adaptation of the six-part text that comprises the spoken and written elements of the *SonoLexic* installation. This includes selected sound fragments offering a kind of listening-reading hybrid.*

The subsequent chapters present material gathered in interviews with interested visitors as part of the **Experimenta Make Sense** public engagement program. The interviews are one-on-one encounters in which I talk to participants about how they experience the world through the aural. I also perform a mini-concert, playing them a range of sounds, figurative and abstract.

I have separated the responses into two chapters: Sound stories, in which the subject shares something about how they listen; and Listening notes, their thoughts on the sounds they are played.

These interviews will be conducted in a number of the venues across the three-year tour of the exhibition, so that this document will continue to be updated and expanded.

SonoLexic



*We start with the word.
The word was sound
and the sound was word*

Some say that in the beginning was the word
and it was a heard word.
But that's starting in the middle of the story.

There was nothing,
then the beginning
and that beginning was a



A Bang they call it —
a big bang —
requiring an added adjective.

But in fact this is deceiving
as it was neither big nor loud.
Rather it came from something infinitesimal
and was completely silent.

But after the silent bang
it was all about expansion:
photons bumping and grinding
through clouds of plasma,
and for a while this could be heard —
if there had been ears to hear.

And even now we can just still hear
the growing pains of this teenage
universe
760,000 years young.
And it sounded a little like this....



*Where do the words go
after they have been said?*

But our ears came much later
and our words much later still.
And these first words were always heard words,
ears and mouths holding all they could contain
for thousands of years.

Until they wanted to add things up
and remember who owed what to whom.
And so words were scratched in stone, on
velum wax and clay,
first pictures, then units of symbolic sounds,
bs and ps and us, eehs and ohs ahhs....



*Where do the words go
after they have been read.*

Now that we could record everything,
Plato said, dictating to his scribe,
we would forget everything.

Now that we can record everything
we need two, three lives to play it all back.

Because sound rolls out in realtime,
all time, old time
and even the bang....that big one...
can still be heard on your AM dial.





Do sounds want to be wanted?

Linguists say that we are incapable of hearing the sounds of words without trying to make sense of them. Once words are learnt they cease to be sounds and are pre-determined units of meaning.

So for a moment
let us not listen to words....



You are listening.
You are listening to a sine tone made of a single frequency 198Hz, the musical note G.

A sine is thought of as the simplest of sounds:
no overtones,
no noise,
no image of the source that made it.

Yet the sound of the sine
Is no less a sign.

Do words have desires for themselves?

Noise is the most complex of sounds, all frequencies playing at equal intensity. Noise is often defined as 'unwanted' sounds, yet there is always a signal in the noise.



Sometimes words are noise.
Sometimes people are noise.
Sometimes feelings are noise.

Narrow your focus.
Concentrate.
Feel the noise.
Filter the noise.
Turn the noise over.



Perception requires updated input,
imagining uses what we already have in store.

Hearing is perception.

Listening is perception + imagining,
telling ourselves the story of what we hear.

Do you have sonic memories?

When you “imagine” a sound,
do you see its source?

If you don’t know a sounds origins,
how do you imagine it then?



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

These words are silent
but they can make us hear.

Firstly they make us hear themselves,
but maybe they can also make us hear
of what they speak?

*A slamming door...
rolling thunder...
a siren....
something tinkling...
metallic...
glassy...
sheering...
glistening...*

Conversely, can we think only in sounds?
Try and think in sounds.
I could help you,
but then maybe you'll be thinking words —
words made of sounds about sounds.



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

Words cannot completely describe a sound,
but they are all that we've got...



Words are for noting
— noticing sound.
An innervoice is note taking.
Listen to the inner voice,
the words noting the sounds,
the sounds of the words
noting the sounds
over the sounds.

We narrate the sounds to ourselves:
a “second-order observation.”

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

When we listen, we are at the
centre.
The sounds are around,
surround us.



When we look, the image is always in front.
We 'imagine' what is behind us.
Listening we are in the middle.

We can also listen into things
Hear the middle of other things
hear something inside something else...

When we look we can't get further
than the outside without breaching a barrier,
breaking the surface.

But this sound ...his sound is around you

Do we listen,
or does our body listen for us,
always in the act,
the present participle

We are listening
as we are being
an always state
of ebbs and flows
a wave
in our consciousness

We are listening.

We are listening to our listening.



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

Sound stories

At the beginning of the *Language of Listening* encounter participants are prompted to talk about how they aurally engage with the world, both via what is collectively accepted as 'music' (collections of sounds intentionally placed together to be listened to within the frame of time), and by attending to the immediate environment (organic and inorganic).

These reflections and observations often take the form of anecdotes, memories and stories, and like Laura, one of the RMIT Gallery participants, I love to listen to stories. I particularly love to listen to stories about listening.

I thank the participants for their stories and allowing me to share them in this format.

Plimsoll Gallery 2018

Hobart, Tas

Postcards & playdough

Machine voices

Writing moments

A process of interpretation

Swimming in sound

Getting the job done

Sounds moving through

Active attention & opening spaces

Stilling the chatter

Brain training



Postcards and play dough

When I was younger, I traveled in Africa, in Burkina Faso. I had an exchange with some friends and I was recording my traveling instead of taking photos. What I found fascinating was when I listened to my tapes about a year after, I had no idea what it was. I couldn't remember where it was, I could recognise some voices, but even the voices were modified because of the wind and the tape. That put me into the poetic of the sound without source. It gave me more joy listening to those tapes of traveling than looking at photos.

When I was 14, which was the age that I travelled, I had no idea [about sound art]. I was not into sound at all. I was not really listening to music. I was making drawings. But I remember that I was making drawings of samples of things that I was looking at. For example if I saw someone who I wanted to draw, I never drew that person entirely. I would draw one eye and a bit of his feet and a bit of grass.

So I guess what interests me is the texture of the sound. I even name files by texture instead of what it is, because I like to trick myself. Being lost and a bit disempowered in a way. Then to re-empower and imagine what it can be enables me to make compositions with it. Because they are de-structured from their source I feel I can take over it, take control of it, a bit like playdough actually, and make a sculpture, a sound sculpture with it.

Stopping time

I just do something very simple. I just close my eyes. I walk around, randomly — even if I'm in a place I know — I like to give myself time, not going anywhere specifically, just following what is happening. And sometimes nothing interesting happens for me. If something happens

then I just stop and close my eyes. And I record it, or not, or it makes me think of the next project or just gives me a little incentive. A fragment. An essence of something maybe. And then I really work with association of ideas. For me it's the most joyful part of listening to where I am. I listen to something and it really takes me to something very different. I just have to take that time and close my eyes. I guess it's a bit of a meditation, but very short, where I stop the time, my time. [Julia]

Machine voices

I just recently became a sound artist thanks to people like Matt [Warren]. I came to art school for photography and now I've completely gone away from that to video and sound. I can definitely see the expression of sound. I get different visuals instead of words.

[I listen] especially in very industrial areas. They definitely bring out more than the [urban] streets. The appeal of industrial sounds is that they're very textural. They're very non-human. But they've also got that aspect of being created by humans. When you live in an urban environment, especially in the western world you're exposed to all these human sounds constantly, and there's always that human step to everything, but with industrial sounds, when they're automated, I really like how they're something of a unique self. They have this voice. [Lochie]

Writing moments

I find too much background music invasive. I think I like quite a lot of silence. For the last 15 years I lived with someone who really loves a lot of music, of all types, and so I think that has led me to being quite passive in terms of curating what I am listening to. I actually crave the absence of music more than I really feel like listening to this, or I want that particular thing. The car is a pretty hot listening place in our lives.

GP: Do you listen to music to help you write?

No. I think it's because I'm interested in stories, or it's just the way my brain is wired. I think I look for meaning, or I go searching into it, so that's too much information I think.

When I think of my theatre-making and collaborating with composers and sound designers, that's a really different part of my practice. In that situation I love to be surprised, because it feels like such an offer. Early on, it was a desire to invite and involve artists working with [sound and music] and I kept working with particular people like Phil Downing for example for over a decade. You start to develop a shorthand. You kind of know what he's going to do and he has some sense of what you're doing. [But] when someone gives you something, especially at an early stage — when something is a bit stuck, or under evolved, or you don't know what it is yet — it's so exciting and a big offer for the sound to lead you or teach you what it could be, or surprise you, create a sort of sudden shift.

When there is a text that already exists, or even if there's not a text but some sort of structure, around a moment in the performance, a framework or guiding principle or energy, there probably are loads of occasions in which I've said 'I think this feeling is this.' But I very much hope for a kind of counter, 'Oh when I look at this structure or think of this moment I think it's a bit more like this'. Co-authorship in defining that moment, Different versions of openness and closedness. [Halcyon]

A process of interpretation

I listen to a lot of things. I guess listening is an interpretation of sound and it can be musical or non-musical. Often what we term as music can also fall in and out of music and non-musical sound. It's a processing of sound matter.

My mum is a music teacher. I've grown up with sound in many forms. I guess I've been trained to process the world at large as a musical object and so I am both conscious and unconscious of interpreting sound heard as potentially musical. But at the same time, whether it's language or unintelligible, we have to think about interpretation to be able to process any sound.

GP: By interpretation do you mean deciding the source of the sound, or wanting to know what your relationship to the sound of that sound is?

I think both of those things are pretty interlinked, for me anyway. I'll have a relationship to it if I can try to identify it. But even if I can't identify it, I will still process it.

The more a sound evades classification the more I'm consciously aware of listening for it and listening for it again. Like when you're trying to go to sleep and that clock over there is just [clicking fingers], and you know what it is. But if I can't identify a sound I'm going to hear it five times louder and I listen for it in future situations so that I can try to identify it. [Jay]

Swimming in sound

I listen to a lot of music, including experimental music. I love music that's kind of drone-like, very minimal, because I find I can lose myself in it. It's an oceanic kind of experience that I enjoy in music. I like closing my eyes when I listen to music so it feels like it envelops me.

Yesterday we bought this new dining room table which is about this long. I've got these really old speakers which I set up and a valve amp that I had in the shed for a long time. I sat at the centre of this table, a speaker on each end and listened to music. It was so rich and incredible — the stereo. It was an amazing listening experience, where I was conscious of listening quite strongly. But normally, when I put music on, say you're initially conscious because you are listening to whether it's the right volume, but then I'd probably lose consciousness of it. When I'm talking with someone or someone is talking to me I'm conscious of listening. It's a different sort of listening I think because that's listening to understand meaning as opposed to the sound.

Enforced listening

We've had this flight path put over our house so that it forces me to listen to things I don't want to hear. I want to shut that off. I normally would be listening quite closely to things if I think it's going to be pleasurable or give me some understanding of something. But in this case it's enforced listening. So that's a new experience for me, although we did have a dog in our previous house that I was forced to listen to. I suppose there are sounds that you don't want to hear, or things you don't want to hear, words you don't want to hear. Normally when I'm at home I feel more in control of listening and when I'm not at home less in control, but these planes have taken that away.

The plane thing is interesting. It's not super loud in terms of deafening, so you can't talk over it, but there's something about the quality of the sound. I'd like to find another sound to play at the same time that somehow brings it in, makes it more part of the environment. But I haven't worked out how to do that yet. I'm still busy trying to get rid of it first. [David]

Getting the job done

I do listen to a lot of music. I'm mainly attracted to hip hop and some experimental hip hop because I like how they present themselves. It's a bit of a character that they normally play and it can be very self-empowering. When I listen to a lot of music I'm normally self-monologuing which ties in with what the mood of the music is. So if it's a sadder song, I might be talking about a sad thing that's coming up, otherwise if it's something aggressive I'll be a little bit more self-empowered. I'm always self-monologuing, if I'm just walking somewhere. That's when I tend to listen to music most, walking.

I like a lot of less natural sounds because I think it's more interesting. I like the sound you can hear there [indicating the fan vent]. I worked in a big blueberry packing shed over the holidays and I really wanted to get in and record it one night. I took some photos... It was very interesting, all the different noises. It's difficult to describe. I think because it's all accomplishing a goal, I think that's why I like it. It's like a — [shhhzz, shhhzzz, shhhzz] — it's doing something. I can appreciate a lot of sounds in nature but it can be a bit less purposeful. I like knowing that every sound correlates to a movement that's in this bigger picture. Like my computer — I can hear the fan when I turning it off [zhouuu], and then everything just stops suddenly. [Liam]

Sounds moving through

I love music but I wouldn't call myself a sound person. I was a dancer so music always just moved straight through my body. I can't just stay still when I hear music, so it's more of a kinetic, somatic thing for me. Someone like [my partner] can just sit completely still and absorb sound. I'm the opposite. It just moves straight through me. I don't hang onto it and think about it much. It helps me flow. Sometimes in the middle of day I think, oh yeah music, put music on, or I wait for my partner to put some music on, and everything starts flowing with whatever I'm doing.

Just in the last few years I've been getting more and more interested in sound. It's a different way of communicating the universe. There's a whole other thing going on there that I haven't really been focused on because I've always been so visual. I know for me, it offers some sort of relief...takes me into a nice space, a more minimal space.

Also we're living in a place that is extremely quiet. We've just got a few cows mooing every now and then, but a very active birdlife as well. I had this experience with a tree that's in my backyard. I was just having a little nap one day and there was this wind moving through the trees. It's a big tree with lots of leaves, and I had this realisation that the tree was musical and that it was singing to me. It was a real kind of epiphany. That tree is my musical friend. So because it's quieter — no city sounds, urban sounds going on everywhere — you definitely become more aware of natural sounds and just how full they are.

But now we've got this new flight path over our head so I'm looking into psychoacoustics. It's this really interesting experience, how invasive sound can act on you psychologically. It's really bringing people undone. We're talking to people around Australia now about flight paths that they weren't expecting when they bought a house.

Particularly if you're in a place where the ambient noise is so little apart from these natural sounds, noisy natural sounds. The frogs go all night long sometimes to the point where I have to put earplugs in but for some reason the rhythm of it doesn't bother me as much as suddenly this [plane noise] coming through the sky. [Michelle]

Active attention and opening spaces

I've got a low tolerance for white noise so I turn all switches off in the house. I'm really conscious of sound. I used to be a music reviewer so for me music can never be wallpaper. I can't have background music. When it's on I'll engage with it. Otherwise it's annoying. It has an intention for me, or it demands attention. If it doesn't demand attention it shouldn't be on because it's not worthy — it's like white noise.

GP: Do you see images when you listen to sounds?

I think it's more a body thing. I love dancing. I'll get a real rush from some music that really excites me. So even though actually I have a writing background, music is a great open space for me, to walk away, to dive in and not do words. Some people will talk to me about lyrics but I really only notice lyrics if they're extremely good or extremely crap. To me the rhythm of the words, the sound of them, conveys meaning, but put it on a page, it's nothing. All the meaning really comes from the tone, the rhythm, the cadence...

I think a soundscape is a really welcome opportunity to drop conscious thought, trains of thought, for me. Sound is definitely a space of relief and release from language and conscious thought...At art school I've settled on sculpture. I do printmaking as well but I'm tending to prefer 3D over the 2D because it seems to me to be more open. You know, you put something on a piece of paper and it's pinned down. [Gabrielle]

Stilling the chatter

I'm a musician so the playing of instruments and feeling out in the writing process is one thing. In terms of listening, I was having a chat with Matt Warren about this a couple of nights ago, lamenting [the change in the] term ambient music, because when I was growing up ambient music was deep listening music and then it became an electronic music genre. And so I wasn't able to find it again. It wasn't really until I started listening to people like [William Basinski](#) on YouTube and it brought up all of these other wonderful recommendations that I was able to tap back into some of that more deep listening kind of thing.

I've got really full-on insomnia so I've been getting into Tibetan bowls. There's a couple of 'three hours of Tibetan bowls' [on YouTube] followed by another three hours of Tibetan bowls that I put on to help me to sleep, so that the chatter stops, which is really fantastic. It's just so soothing. With these really spacious bowls — sometimes there's a little bit of rain or something mixed into it — something about the vibration is super calming. Really helps me to sleep and relieves anxiety.

There was a time when I was a teenager when I was obsessively the same with the soundtrack of [Paris, Texas](#). You went through the tape and got rid of [some tracks], but the sleepy quality — it was all that spacious, ambient kind of sound. I'm attracted to melancholy sounds and tones, really emotional stuff. As a writer there is some music that I can put on that is more of a deep listening thing that I can write to. The words flow. I write my songs listening to that kind of music. There's something with the tones I think that can keep you focused in a particular mood perhaps.

It's almost like it creates a stillness, because the silence is sometimes too noisy. Whereas if you've got something really gentle just to occupy that little space in your mind where you're doing all this serious thinking and reading, it just takes away that extra chatter. [Hannah]

Brain training

I listen to lots of things, but I think a lot of the time I'm very unaware of what the sounds are going on around me. I've never done music so it's not something that I'm really critical about. I just enjoy it. I think it's very rare that I stay [listening to everyday sounds] for very long. Just finding space and time, taking time out. Whereas I can go and see [music] and sit and listen for two hours. I think the music actually helps me. [Rashad Becker](#) was here at MONA, and a couple of days after that, not intentionally, it just came about that I was listening and I realised that I was listening in the same way. So I think the music — maybe not the music — but the context of the music trains you.

[On listening to experimental music.] It feels like its using a different part of the brain. I was listening to a Steve Reich thing, [[Different Trains](#)], and the way that the words come in with that made me listen in a different way. But then with crap pop music, I'll be sing badly along in the car, it's the same density, it's just you want something different out of it. Sometimes you want to let go. But sometimes your brain wants to engage. When I was listening to all the [NOW now](#) stuff in Space 3 [in Sydney, early 2000s], it was more like study time for making design stuff, looking at shapes and forms and movement. It's almost like getting drunk listening to pop music. But you do it with the same level of engagement. I do anyway. [Sean]

Listening notes

The *Language of Listening* encounter involves a concert-for-one, in which a set of sounds are played to the participant who is invited to discuss them: what they think they are hearing; if it makes them see things; remember things; how the sounds make them feel.

The first set of sounds are field recordings ranging from the domestic to environmental. These encourage a propensity to think about the source of the sound—the figure, as I term it. However rather than emulating a “mystery sounds” guessing game format, the participants are encouraged to explore descriptive language beyond the simple naming of the source.

The second set of sounds are purely electronic and are, to some ears, agitating noise. To other participants they are quite pleasing and stimulating. With the origin of the sound much harder to pinpoint these sounds elicit a more abstract set of descriptions and some fascinating observations.

The arrangement and collections of sounds differ slightly (some the same, some new additions) between the interview sessions undertaken at each venue. They are presented both as separate sounds and responses, as well as accumulated soundscapes with more extensive comments.

Plimsoll Gallery

Hobart, Tas

Figurative sound

[Sound 1](#)

[Sound 2](#)

[Sound 3](#)

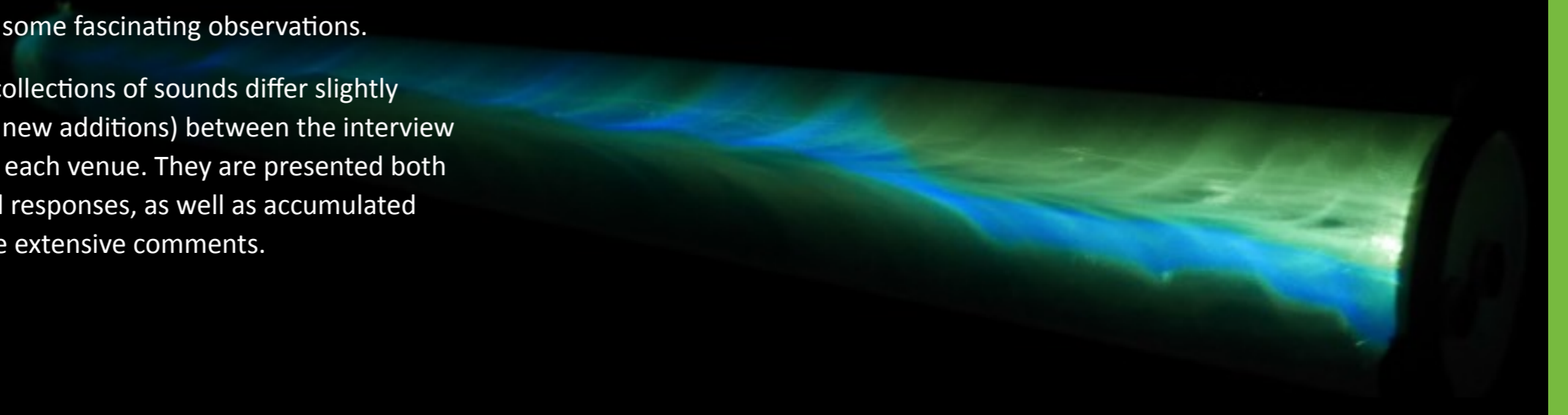
[Sound 4](#)

[Sound 5](#)

[Soundscape](#)

Non-Figurative sound

[Soundscape](#)





Kind of scratchy and textured. Fuzzy and fizzy. Actually it's climbing up something, or around something. And diminishing, but also extending, like it's got volume. It's like it's carving something out. [Sean]

It definitely sounds edible. It sounds like something coming up and out of a person as well. It also sounds a little like milk frothing. Like a really gentle version of an espresso machine. Not as violent. [Hannah]

What I actually like are the last little blobs of bubbles that are quite separated and pitched high. It tickles my ears. [Julia]

It's really nice, the tapering at the end. Just the way it fades out naturally. Of course it's fluid but it has this really coarse nature to it which I really like. Is it pouring a coffee? [Lochie]

It sounds a lot like being out in the desert, sand being kicked around or flying around. It also sounds a bit like a bong. It feels a bit more outdoorsy. If I were hearing this, I don't think I'd be with anyone. You can hear the steam escaping...reminds me of crunching on gravel. [Liam]

The top of it sounds like wind and then it sounds like pouring. What I would guess, if it were on a TodayFM guessing game, I'd probably guess that it was a kettle, or water pouring. But it also sounds a bit like tearing, paper tearing or sort of separating. It's like air passing through a small space, like blowing or sucking or something. We're hearing the volume as well, how much is in the pour, the size of the spout, the volume of the vessel that you're going into. [Halcyon]

It's a milkshake. Or maybe coffee, heating the milk. Or slurping up a straw. Actually no, it's pouring a glass of champagne and the bubbles fizzing. [David]

Sucking up something out of straws, milkshakes. Coffee too. A coffee pot isn't it? At first I thought it was sucking, then I realised it's boiling over. It definitely has a fire quality. Boiling over, heat. Fire and heat which is very satisfying. [Michelle]

Well it sounds a little bit like some sort of coffee machine. At the same time, towards the end of it, is that a record player? There's a bit of a scratching, crackling thing happening there. [Gabrielle]

I have a couple of pictures. One would be like the end of a record when the needle just scrapes across that last piece of vinyl before picking itself up and that little [tounk] of the [arm]. But the other is actually — and I'm tasting coffee — like pouring the hot water into a plunger. The little ending, disconnect of the microphone or whatever is recording the sound, doesn't really make sense. It does give a relationship to the person recording the sound, but not necessarily to the sound of the beaker or the coffee. It's quite hot. Maybe I'm just looking for coffee. And the steam. You can hear the steam coming off the water as it's building up its body of liquid, changing pitch. [Jay]



I feel like it is a marching band, or a marching group of people. I have this feeling that there is a really big mass of alive things marching. But also they're all whispering something in my ears that I can't quite get. [Julia]

It has a trotting sound that's really nice. It brings in this organic feel [drums fingers on table]. It has a pattern to it, a rhythm, which I tend to look for in sounds. You look for the pattern. I think the earliest interaction we have with sound and sound approaching music is through rhythm. [Lochie]

Is that the record? No. That actually reminds me of the races. Or dragging a stone, or even an old timber-wheeled cart over rocky ground. It's quite a dense sound. But I feel like it's earthy. It's a kind of very marketed sound because if you listen to the Melbourne Cup and you're not actually watching it, I think this is the kind of sound you'd be hearing. [Jay]

It feels a lot deeper, like it's under water...not under water but like under something, hidden by something. Is this somebody smoking a cone? The draw. The reason I say that is that it doesn't sound like it's being pushed, it feels like it's being drawn through the bubbles. [Sean]

Bubbles and temperature. It's a beautiful kind of oscillating sound. It's a little bit like shortwave radio. And you've got some birds in the background too which is nice. Sounds like a good morning waiting for boiling water. [Hannah]

You've even got some cheerful little birds to get the morning feels. Because I drink coffee from a stove top, espresso, I'm like a rat at the pedal, waiting for the coffee, for the reward. It's a rewarding sound. There's something outer space-like about it as well. It sounds a bit like old Doctor Who sci-fi. Like it could be a sound that would be associated with a robot. It's like the voice... [Halcyon]

We get to the espresso pot eventually, right? I like that noise because you know that just as it changes slightly, you've got to get the pot off the stove, otherwise your coffee gets scorched. So making coffee is a real listening art. It's a nice round sort of noise. [Gabrielle]

That's a nice happy sound. Satisfying. Ready. That last feeling, it's finishing something. It's a pleasurable sound for sure. [Michelle]

This one's like being at someone else's house. I can hear the kettle boiling and I think there might be some birds in the background. It feels a lot like [being at] one of my grandmother's friend's house that I keep in touch with. They have a place up in the hills. It's nice because the sounds are all different. I reckon it would be really pretty where the recording is. Just a guess. It's like when you're inside and it's raining. It feels safe, homely. [Liam]

Coffee pot. It reminds me of mud, boiling mud. Or tar pits. Birds in the background. It's black and the other [first] sound is white or clear. I imagine the coffee bubbling away. Black, frothy, thick. Some other quality to it as well. I can't quite put my finger on it on. [I like it] I because it reminds me of coffee, makes me feel like a coffee, I can smell the coffee. [David]

Sound will open as weblink (internet required).



Sounds crystalline, and it sounds like it's happening in multiple places. It's very cold. There's a kind of squeezing, like something small and kind of viscous. Or it's jelly spheres being squeezed through

fingertips. Something like that but multiply. It's actually got a really metallic sheen to the back end. You know like Costa Rican coffee has got this weird little bitter ting at the back of it. I like how it echoes just a tiny bit higher. [Sean]

It makes me think of insects talking to one another. It's like some sort of dripping or something like a bell. There's something dripping on metal...[Halcyon]

Rain. Or a shower. It's quite light though, tinny. Draining. Bouncing off... tin. Glass! It's glass! Glass is a bit richer. Tin is more reflective, like it just bounces off, echoey. [Michelle]

Glass. Little droplets. Is it ice?. Something being poured on ice. It's got a crackly sort of liquidity — feels clear — like a clear liquid. It's got a high-pitch dripping. Is it in a glass? Sounds like a wine glass or something. [David]

Coke in a glass. It's very light, a very very light sound. It's a very crystal sound. It's also trapped. It's a self-contained popping. Even though the glass is probably open, I can't imagine this sound having the power to make it out of the glass. It's obviously a very soft sound, amplified in its recording to this. [Jay]

It's lovely. It's got a beautiful fragility. Thinness, Fineness too. [Gabrielle]

It's just beautiful. It's definitely got a, 'What are you trying to say' SOS. It's really pretty. Squishy. There's that little squeaky kind of sound in between the tapping. [Hannah]

The only thing I have with that sound is I feel it's a lot of points on one long line. This one is nearly too minimal for my listening to imagine something more. I can only get an abstraction of it. Something geometrical in shape, mathematical. There's a bit of a tapping thing, morse code... [Julia]

It has a duality to it. It has the point where it's dripping but then it has that contact moment where it's actually very static. Very electric. It's got varying levels of frequencies. [Lochie]

I'm not sure what to think of this one. It's kind of a little bit similar to the tin roof I was saying before. It also feels like waiting at a bus stop. That's a weird thing to say but I feel I can hear cars or something very slightly...[Liam]



Wow, squeezey. I can see something very vividly, a real world thing, an experiment where there was some metal, I think it was lithium, and the teacher cut off a piece and put in a big water-filled jar and it fizzed around. Again it's something squeezing out. It doesn't sound like there's much pressure. It sounds like it's leaking almost. It could be water or it could be air that's leaking out. It sounds quite liquid. Is that the air bubbles [in the ice]? Ice cubes are amazing. When you look at them you can see there are these sheets, crystalline, but they're not ordered. They're not like when water boils and it's all hexagonal and it just seems quite amorphous. [Sean]

That's like someone squeezing a balloon before it starts to whine, or the end of a balloon after it's whined. But again it's wet...It's only a small amount of ice cubes because it's almost like a solitary melt compared to a large body of ice which would have a clink and a chunk. And more intense cracks I suppose because the change in temperature as it's melting is more severe. There'd be more shock and stress. I guess this is also a sound under stress because it's screaming. But I imagine that it would have a different quality considering the volume of ice or the size of the ice block. [Jay]

What is that? [GP: This one is ice]. In the same glass just sort of melting? It's really squeaky isn't it. It feels like it's being squeezed through something. Is the ice right up against the glass? That squeakiness like it's expanding against something. [David]

It seems like some electronic frequency but it also reminds me of insects at night. There's a lot of lovely little high pitched creatures at night. It's quite healing isn't it. It really gets into little zones in your head. [Michelle]

It's just amazing how electronic it sounds. It sounds like those little frequency knobs that you turn making a high-pitched noise. It almost sounds like a kiss, puckering up...Melting...You'd hear a similar thing in a fire wouldn't you. When it's squealing like that, it's kind of like a screaming death, but really small. [Hannah]

That makes me think of nighttime and outside. Although I'm sure it's something else. It's that squeaking, like insects. It makes me think of being outdoors at night. Or like maybe a budgie, at the end, the kissy bit. Like a budgie kiss. [Halcyon]

They're rubbing up against each other. You know that's really surprising. I didn't think it would sound like that. I thought it would be a lot more abrasive. It's having a good conversation there. [Gabrielle]

This one's a little uncomfortable. Is it drinking through a straw when there isn't much left? Not very comfortable...Are they on something warmer...there's definite like some agitation, discomfort there. [Liam]

It's frustrating listening to that. I don't know, it's got that voice aspect to it as it creaks out. The noise is frustrated. So then I project into that. It sounds like a kind of a cry for help. I was just listening to [\[Philip Samartzis' sounds from Antarctica\]](#) the other day. He says it was like ghosts in the ice. [Lochie]

Sound will open as weblink (internet required).



Crackle. It's pleasant to listen to it actually isn't it? Crackle and snap. It's brittle. Yes, a brittle sound. You try to imagine the hand — if it is a hand — what the action is that

it's doing. Like hollow plastics or something. You imagine the material and the action of cracking something. [Halcyon]

Paper is it? It sounds a bit scratchy. Crackling and popping. Are you scrunching it up? ASMR normally has quite a breathy [quality] rather than a crackle, I've noticed. I haven't heard [much], I've only really seen folding towels and brushing hair, but ASMR does have a certain quality which is a whispery, swishy. [David]

I think the appeal of ASMR is the human aspect, the integration of voice. I think that's the calming part. A lot of people use it as a relaxation tool. I guess your mother's voice, calming. [Lochie]

Small planar or linear. It feels like something's kind of crunching around inside your ears. That's quite beautiful. It almost purrs at times. [Sean]

I like the panning, It's lovely. I know that it's something being scrunched but I want it to be a fire. Again it's a beautiful crackle. [Hannah]

This one's quite — what's the word — present, touching. This reminds me of fire as well, crackling like a bursting of oil or something, which I guess happens when you're burning wood. [Michelle]

This is a lot of things. It's like crunching up paper but a really stiff heavy weight. Nice paper. Or it's kind of an old fire, just those last embers. With a little bit of flame. It's warm but it's not hot and raging anymore.

GP: Do you have a specific image of a fire?

I was thinking of the slow combustion fires. Growing up on a farm we had a combustion fire in the lounge room. Sitting and watching that for hours like a TV (because for many years growing up we didn't have a TV). While it's not a match to that sound, there's an approximation which triggered that visual memory. [Jay]

It's really nice...The comfort I'm getting from it has a lot to do with [the fact that] I already feel a little comfortable. If I heard this somewhere else it would be [more agitating]. [Liam]

Lubricated, greased and skipping around. [Gabrielle]



Figurative soundscape

That would be a great introduction to a National Geographic story about lightning or the rain. I would term that as a piece of music even when it's predominantly non-traditional sounds. Of course there is the synthesiser or strings in there. But the build up and the crescendo, from the single drip and the notion of time being introduced with the clock ticking, through to the synthesiser, a kind of imagined source of the clouds building up and rolling in, and maybe that electrical energy, which is starting this storm. To then — and that made me smile, as it's kind of beautiful — the beginning of this storm on the tin roof which was a very, not warming feeling, but nostalgic. And then the build up of the storm as a kind of natural crescendo. I could still hear the rhythm of the clock and the original drop, which were kind of time signifiers, until the storm took over, and from that moment, it also suspended time. [Jay]

I guess there are a few things going on when I listen to that. I really like it and it's relaxing. In a literal way you identify the sounds that you recognise. But then I suppose there's another thing happening [around] the sounds that you don't recognise, what I would call the more musical sounds. Even though I realise it's all intentional, when that starts to happen, then you go into creating a space in your mind, which somehow asks the question, or feels like you're being shown, how a storm is something other than a storm, or the way in which a storm means something else. So there's a feeling of expectation. You as the listener are being carried along somewhere, or invited into a created space that starts to build. As those elements are working together, the literal identification game of 'this is a raindrop' or a thunderstorm becomes something else, the creation of a kind of feeling or atmosphere. [Halcyon]

A tap dripping into the laundry sink, or the bath. I don't mind the tap dripping but whatever that scratching is underneath, sounds like a footsteps or something, gravel, it's a little bit grating. I suppose the dripping tap could be irritating if I knew I could get up and turn it off, but just hearing it in this context it's quite nice. The fire's nice, I like that sound. It feels like it's building up to something, I'm waiting for something to kick in, anticipating...We're in for something. I'm curious about where it's taking us. Even if it goes nowhere it's cool.

Feels like it's getting out of control. Is that rain on the roof or rocks on the roof from a landslide? It's got a bit of a landslide quality, thundering rocks falling. But now it feels like heavy droplets of rain. It's probably my favourite sound, rain. It means you've just got to stay inside you can't go out and do stuff all. You just have an excuse to snuggle up and read a book, or just sit by the fire. And when it goes away, it's like damn, now I've got to do stuff.

I don't see the tap I just see the surface of the water, the drop. And the rain, I see underneath a corrugated iron roof. Fire. It's not really a specific image just a nice vibe of a campfire or wood heater. It's a feeling more than a picture. [David]

I couldn't help myself have immediate images of what the source was, so I was in front of a fire, under a storm...A very specific fire, in Taruna, where we housesat when we came here 5 years ago and we were waiting for everything [to arrive]. That fire was so special.... just comforting even if everything else was violent...[Julia]

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[Dripping] One of my favourites. I would spend a long time in the bath just listening to the jazz of it. Just getting off on it thinking 'it's actually making so much sense' and then actually turning the tap so that it would just play for me.

That's a nice contrast isn't it. For me this is just incredibly soothing. Except I'm a bit concerned about the tap because it might mean putting the fire out. For some reason there's a tap dripping into the fire while watching the storm roll in and it says danger, danger it's coming. There's an anticipation. An expectancy. Holding your breath. Waiting for it to come. Waiting for it to happen. There's the warmth on your face with the cold drops cooling you down. I can smell some kind of saté chicken being cooked on the fire because we're in tropical rain and it must be somewhere north. Not here. Definitely not here. And then the beautiful comfort of "Quick. Let's go inside and cuddle and watch the rain'. So beautiful. [Hannah]

It's very rhythmic, I could dance to this. This is a really beautiful complex rhythm. Sort of filling out, really expansive. There's a lot of rain happening. It's probably a soundtrack for what happened here last Thursday: advance of the flood. Thunder is an amazing sound. I know it's supposed to have a threat there. It's just got so much power, the turbulence and the energy.

We don't get a lot of thunderstorms here in Hobart. Rain on the roof is a really beautiful sound. Because you're inside. There's a sort of a smugness to the sound. What's really strange with rain on the roof is when you step outside and the rain wasn't that big. It just makes it into an event. [Gabrielle]

That was really good. At the start with the clock, and the water dropping it made my heart beat weirdly, because the beat was a bit wonky. It didn't match up. I really liked, towards the end, how the sounds transformed into completely different things. Like the doors, they were normal at first then they became this very stressful flurry, all around. Then I'm not sure if the doors stopped and it was rain or if the doors transformed until it sounded like rain. Then all of a sudden there was no more doors and there was rain on the roof.

GP: I'm wondering what you are hearing as the doors...the hard rain on the roof?

It's like going out one door and into another. That's what I was hearing. It was like... If you're in the middle of an intersection but instead of people walking on crossroads they're walking through doors all around you. And it changed from being comfortable. The electronic thing came in and it kind of helped the transition. [Liam]

That was really homely, especially for me, as a Tasmanian. It's such a consistent sound that you hear all the time. I like how dense the soundscape was. There's something really appealing to me about things like that. Really dense, compact big cities always feel comforting. I know a lot of people find that claustrophobic and containing but I like soundscapes where there's not really any gaps between the sounds. You've kind of filled all the frequencies. That's really comforting. I love the density and it makes me think of home. [Lochie]

Bathtub. Just you in a cavernous space. A bit lonely. Rumbling fire again. Elastic, strings and elastic, nylon. Vibration. Some lovely thunder. Twang. Rain on a tin roof. Hail.

GP: So are you seeing these things?

Yes. But more archetypal. I guess I just go straight to the future. I just started thinking about a rain room that were thinking of doing somewhere. That's not memory-based, it's more what can I do with it. A lot of that last bit was taking me into my own home because they're regular sounds there. There's a lot of corrugated iron around and fires going and rain and little tiny hail drops. I'm thinking of my home, but I'm not really just going back to there. It's kind of inspiring, it takes me somewhere else. [Michelle]



Non-figurative soundscape

I just love this kind of sound. I just love it. I was thinking, what is it like that I feel, and what came in my mind — in my mouth actually — was eating a velvet moon. There is something very big and round and soft but unknown, and feeling too big, but that's fine also. [The sine tone] is something like a moon. I don't want to say a ball, because a ball is too small. Something mineral, but covered with something soft. It's way more personal, very very internal. Maybe that's why I feel like eating the moon, or a velvet moon, because it just goes in there and I digest it and it's delicious. [Julia]

So that to me is more like a car wash experience, where I just wanna give over to it. Not attach to it, just actually let it do its work. Which is good work in that healing kind of way. Just let it have its effect on my brain and not get in the way. Just step outside. I was reminded of a car wash because I love car washes for that reason — they're an experience. But yeah I just wanted to get out of the way and let it take over, physically take over, vibration-wise. [Michelle]

I closed my eyes that time and I think that it changes how I was listening because I'm listening to how the sound is moving inside my head. It feels like you follow the way that it moves in the sound design and that there's not a lot of room for much else. It's quite a full experience following the movement and the build. It's quite a pervasive kind of experience of following its direction for me, or being taken.

Maybe it does the thing that meditation, or a mundane task can do, which is that it occupies a certain conscious part of your brain. What does that cancel out? Perhaps the other things that you're thinking when your eyes are open, like that cord over there and that funny little dictaphone and the yellow scissors. That sort of listening takes the place of that because you're following the movement and direction. That occupies your mind. It's commanding. It commands your attention. [Halycon]

Sounds like the relentless conversation going on in my head most of the time. The wanting to be calm with the low noises but the incessant bleeping of the other noise that goes on in your head. They certainly can agree with each other though. It's not anxiety inducing for me. I think it could be quite meditative if you actually allowed yourself to hear it.

There was definitely a bit of tension and release or suspension and release. It was nice that sound, more like a kind of wash, a sort of whiteness coming in. Maybe it was like giant waves coming into a train or something. For me there was something solid and then something taking over. I was trying to associate it to something but it didn't necessarily take true form. The nature of that washy wave sound, that's where the suspense and then relief comes in. It's that kind of an oceanic sense, that it pulls back, it doesn't overwhelm you. [Hannah]

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We just traveled back in time from the modern age to the Industrial Revolution. Again I will describe it in terms of a narrative although there are a couple of disconnected pictures. Again I had quite defined progression from beginning to crescendo.

So the initial kind of hum made me think of diving and being underwater. The kind of all-encompassing white noise of being underwater. Or maybe I was just imagining being in a large expanse of water. It's an incredibly expansive still yet enveloping space, which is, I think, why I would go for water because it wouldn't work as an image in my head up on land. But then there was also a kind of an image, I guess like *Tron* or *Neuromancer*, of being inside an electrical system and the pulses of that. The old school kind of dial-up modem internet sounds. The passage of information, a digital hum that disconnects from the natural world which was the first image.

But then there was the introduction of the static or [something] mechanical, which actually sounded like the distortion of a train. But also within that distortion, it located me back in the sea or back in a large body of water where that sound kind of became the lapping of the water up against a stony, not a sandy beach, stony or shelly. There's more rasp and there's more grain to the sound. And then that oscillated back to a digital disruption towards the end where it was like it was still grasping for a connection but not quite making it yet. And then it ended. [Jay]

It was a lot more difficult to think while listening to that last one. I was probably listening a little closer to the sounds because it was all I could really focus on... seeing it more all together as well rather than maybe each little part...I was talking to one of tutors recently and we were talking about harsh noise and he said that the point of it, is that it's super chaotic for a period but then you get like a bit of a glow period after it...directly after it...I was waiting for it to kick back up. [Liam]

It's got ominous tones to it but something about it excites me. I like that high-pitched sound coming in. It increases the tension in it. Again it increases my curiosity about where it's going. I like that moving between. Morse Code quality. Makes it more dynamic. That other high-pitched sound coming in adds another angle to it. Starting to get a bit more intense and ominous. I'm wondering what's about to hit me. Something sneaking in there. That white noise is like a waterfall... It's cool. In that last part I wasn't talking because I was enjoying it, and wanting to feel in it.

GP: Do you feel like you go to a different place when you listen this compared to when you listen to figurative things?

Yes. I guess because it feels like there's an intention, someone's created it. So I'm curious about where it's going because somebody has chosen to do it like that and I guess I sit more attentively. I suppose it's an adventure. Whereas with the thunder [piece], I just relax into that.

I find myself putting my own narrative on it. I mean there are associations, obviously, with other music...like in the movies...particular sounds that cue the idea of 'there is something just around the corner'. But it's not a narrative in the sense that I formulate a whole story. It's fragments probably. Pulling different narrative bits together. Dreamlike I suppose. [David]

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It hurts my ears because I've listened to too much loud music. It was a real relief, the lower pitched kind of washing sound that comes in to kind of mask, or overwhelm the more electronic, electrical pulse. That frequency was really intense. It's a kind of an alien world but a lot of sounds that we have are like that. It's very dehumanised but it really produces some really interesting...the energy again and the shifts and the relationships. That [swooshing] sound is kind of smoothing, soothing, counteracting and I just felt like it was washing, was a great relief.

Strangely enough it's more figurative to me. My father was a civil engineer and when I was a kid, on weekends he'd take me into the laboratory that they had to test the stress of materials. And there was quite a lot of stuff that made those noises. And it was all really alien. It was all very mechanical and cold and hard. The lab was really cold. When I was listening to that it had that story, it was a background mood. It's like entering into that world of life that isn't carbon-based. It's raw energy. [Gabrielle]

I always look within the sounds for the character behind the sound. That's what I pursue when I listen, but then I try to hear those different transitions between the sounds. I really like how a switch turns over as they both meet. There's always a moment in between the different tones where they meet and I think that's a really nice moment. There's heavy walls [of sound] but then

there's these little moments where everything kind of blends in. I think that's what a lot of noise artists aim for. Little balances between the sounds they create. People who haven't really been exposed to it hear a big body of [sound] but when you listen to those moments...I think that's the key to noise for me, those little of things. They represent the technical capability of the artist. I always draw comparisons to classical music, that moment when everything else stops and then the lead just keeps going. It's like this breathtaking moment. Getting your head above water as if you're drowning, drowning in all this different percussion, these different strings, and then suddenly this one string section will just keep playing. [Lochie]

It's kind of weird because going through this and actually talking about it adds another layer of thinking about it. Being aware, conscious of it, trying to decipher it or put it in words. When I listened to that it seems like there's this search, this kind of testing out of things and this kind of metering out of approach or space or something. And then there's a settlement on something and it just peters out. It's almost as if it's like one block of a whole heap of movements or kind of searchings of things. I think normally, if I'd just been listening to it and it wasn't in this context, I would have just sunk into it. But here you're trying to pull yourself out of it and make sense of that in words. It's always about a movement or a shape for me. [Sean]

About the artist

Gail Priest is a Sydney/Katoomba-based artist whose practice features sound as the key material of communication and investigation. She has exhibited sound installations and performed electroacoustic compositions nationally and internationally including at ISEA2016, Hong Kong; Werkleitz Festival, Germany; the Sonoretum, Kapelica Gallery, Slovenia; Tokyo Wonder Site, Japan; Artspace, Sydney; and Performance Space, Sydney. She has undertaken several commissions for ABC Radio and released five albums. She is also a curator of concerts and exhibitions, and writes factually and fictively about sound and media arts, in particular for RealTime magazine (2001-2017).

In 2015-2016 Priest was the Australia Council Emerging and Experimental Arts Fellow, developing a body of ficto-critical work exploring what art will sound like in the future. Her upcoming projects explore an 'ideasthesia' of sound and text by developing a hybrid form of 'sound-writing'.

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