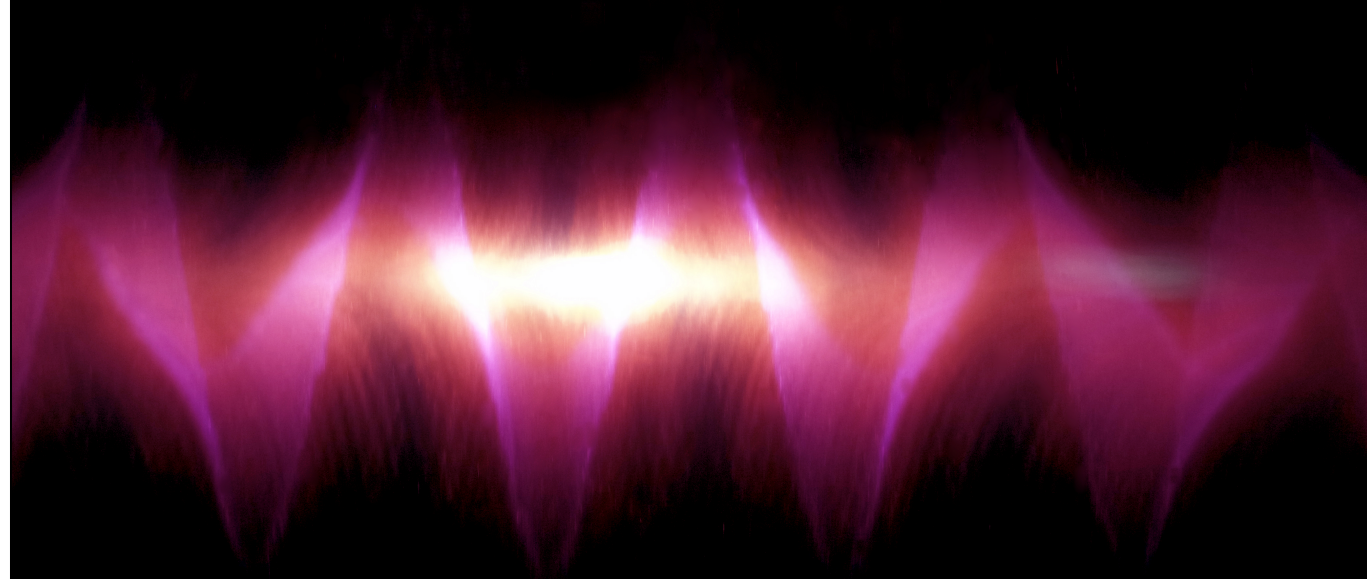


GAIL PRIEST

SonoLexic: *the language of listening*



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

version 1, February 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>

** Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser.
Internet connection required. Headphone listening recommended.*

The publication

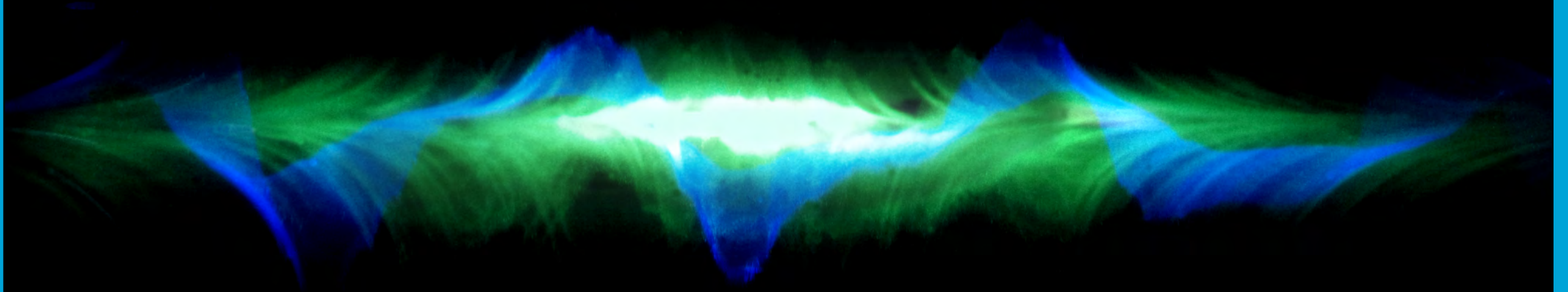
Chapter 1 introduces the ideas under consideration via an adaptation of the six-part text that comprises the spoken and written elements of the *SonoLexic* installation. This includes selected sound fragments offering a kind of listening-reading hybrid.*

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.

RMIT Gallery 2017

Mysterious sounds

Quiet walker

The sound of ochre

Sitting with sound

Material listening

Spatial listening

Industrial angst

Meditative melodies

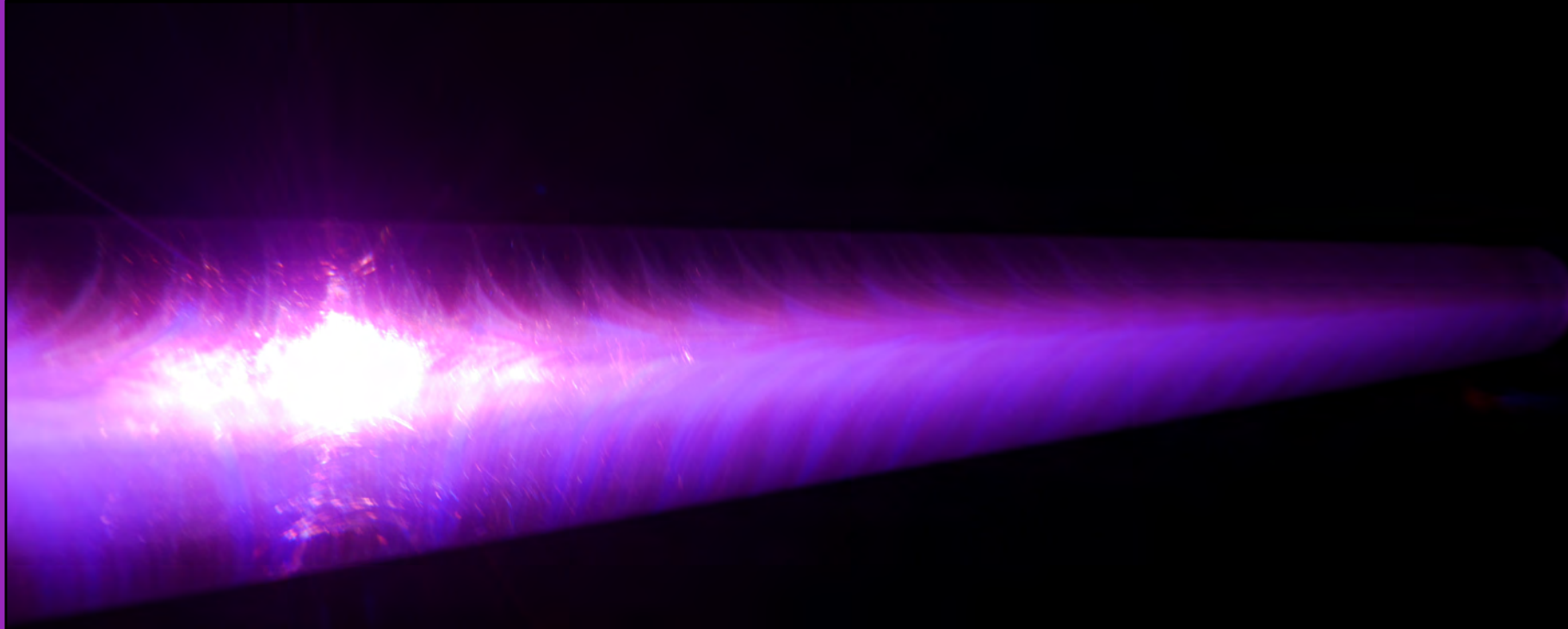
Being connected

Beyond taxonomies

On structure

Vibrational memories

Sound of weather, memory of place



Mysterious sounds

I had a project as part of Bogong Centre for Sound Culture program. It was in an old dam with walls from the 1940s, part of the hydroelectric scheme, and my work was in that dam wall.

You can walk through the wall itself — there's a walkway suspended through the whole thing — and there is infrastructure in there but you don't see it. And the sound in there is really something.

There are all sorts of sounds — some of them are sounds of water, dripping, gushing — and just other odd sounds. It's so mysterious where the sounds are coming from.
(Dianne, 6/10/2017)

Quiet walker

I sometimes go about in the dark. I can do it by feeling the surfaces in the house, if I don't want to turn the light on for some reason. I can walk really, really quietly. I notice the very slightest sounds if I do that. (Dianne, 6/10/2017)

The sound of ochre

I'd known about synaesthesia...but only a few weeks ago I experienced a colour sensation that came about when there was a particular sound. I kept seeing orange things — triangles and shapes. It hung around while that sound was on and when the sound stopped it went away.

I can't actually remember the sound now. It wasn't as sharp... maybe had a bit more of a growl behind it. Certainly textured. But more in line with earth.

Earth like if you've got a shovel and dug some earth out of the ground. In the colour of terracotta — like clay is — not the red stuff but that nice brown colour. A bit grainy. Like crushed granite. It might be about 4-5mm in diameter. Rough. Not as big as the stuff they use for the road but sometimes you get that finer stuff on a dirt road. A bit like that clumped together. An ochre colour — ochre that's the colour — mixed with a bit of dull brown.

I was able to have it persist for quite a while.
(Dianne, 6/10/2017)

Sitting with sound

I live in a little apartment in the city, so there's a lot of ambient noise all the time, cars and people on the street. Depending on what I'm doing — like if I'm lying in bed awake — I might just listen to all those sounds like a soundscape around me...

I listen to the sounds around me in those waiting times, when you're waiting to do something and there's not something else that you're meant to be concentrating on. I like it when that happens, especially if it's raining...

I love hiking and the really lovely thing about the silence of hiking is being able to hear all those noises around you, which are very impersonal noises but also then make you feel very human. I find that really beautiful because it will just continue to keep going — the fire will keep crackling, the rain will keep falling — or not, and you can't do anything about it. But for that period of time you get to sit with that sound.

I'm thinking of lots of really specific sounds in nature that I really enjoy, that I could listen to for long periods of time. I just sit there and listen to them, not really feeling like I need to do anything with them. (Jess, 6/10/2017)

Material listening

I listen first to my body, then I listen to what's coming out of the speakers. Philosophically speaking it's the mind and body working together. It's not the mind that is actually working first over the body. And as you say, a lot of people hear things but they don't listen. So one of the people who has influenced my work and my research is Pauline Oliveros who's done a lot of work on "deep listening." So I use a lot of her techniques to explore sound.

What's important to me and my research is that the sound that I'm channeling is actually coming from an urban environment, if you could call it that. I'm interested in the domestic space and taking sounds from a private to a public space. In those encounters I use kitchen appliances and kitchen tools to make sounds so I'm channeling a lot the textures and tonalities of mechanised noise that you would find in the kitchen and using that sound to represent a certain way of listening and thinking about the world.

I see matter, for myself and my own research, as having feelings. All of the sounds that you are making are being channeled through you to the material and so the material and yourself are almost connected. It's a form of what I would call assemblage — an intra-action of materiality that is working at the same time.

I see everything as being connected because I am Feminist New Materialist. Which means that everything that is material, whether it's coming from the human or non-human world, is still very much one and the same in the way that it thinks and feels and reacts in the world. (Julianna, 7/10/2017 - www.julianaespanakeller.com)

Spatial listening

I think there are moments when you go internal and you can block sound but then something catches your eye visually and you start becoming interested in it, seeking information. So I think there's a mechanism that allows you to switch in and out of sounds.

I think what I picture is a concentrated pathway to what I want to hear. So if there are multiple sounds, I'm probably trying to concentrate on where the one I'm interested in is coming from, so I probably use the visual to locate that.

I've taken part in a few of those in the dark performances, where it's really dark and your listening is highly accentuated. I love that. It's really interesting when you suddenly notice where sounds are coming from spatially around you. (Jutta, 7/10/2017, vimeo.com/pryorart)

Industrial angst

Usually, I listen while I'm moving. It's strange, I like silence when I'm sitting, stationary.

Especially in Melbourne, I've become very hyper-sensitised to the building work — I find it very overwhelming. They're digging the tunnels at the moment and that large drill — the sound of that. I know when it's going to happen and I have to try to block it out. I thought I'd become more numb to it, but I've become more and more aware and it's making me find the CBD really stressful.

It's strange because I see why people might find beauty in industrial noise and I've got friends that make experimental music from industrial sounds but I generally don't find beauty in it. Until the other day when I was on some escalators and someone was drilling. I don't know what was happening but there was like this high-pitched birdsong coming from the drill. I've got a recording of it on my phone. (Kate, 6/10/2017)

Meditative melodies

I have a habit of doing meditation on public transport, so I might use some isochronic sound to aid that. It's sound that is pulsed at various frequencies to encourage certain brainwave frequencies.

Does that mean that you're shutting out the sounds of the external environment?

No, but I think that's more a personal philosophical approach to meditation. For some people it's impossible unless they can be in a really silent, tranquil environment. For me that is aesthetically and philosophically unnecessary. You're still in an environment, it's ok to be in the environment. You're still going to have attentional processes — be drawn by a loud sound or a strong smell or a wave of heat, or something. That's all OK. Trying to block that completely is not what I'm into.

Do you ever stop and listen to the environment in a kind of framed way.

Well if I've stayed up all night — the dawn chorus of bird song — I start to deeply listen to that. I realise that it's really not repeating at all and that there are phrases and there are responses. A melody reveals itself to me in that state that I find really legible at that time. (Keiran, 7/10/2017, soundcloud.com/ruffles)

Being connected

Since I was a child I always loved listening, stories especially and then music for sure. I'm Italian so I like Italian music — it's much easier to understand the meaning — but I like English music too. Even when I was younger I couldn't understand everything, I was just listening to the sound and not the meaning. But I was finding pleasure in just the sound, enjoying the sound of words, not just the music.

I'm working a lot on connection with other people and I find connection is really hard to find with strangers (everywhere, not just in Australia). You will notice at tram stops or on a train — now I'm counting them instead of just noticing them — all the people that are listening to music or simply talking on or using phones instead of enjoying the outside landscape. It might be the same landscape you see everyday but it's not the same.

I really enjoy sound. I'm trying to learn about sound healing. The way you can use your voice as an instrument to unblock the energy at particular points. You can just say something or use a particular sound of course...if you're working on someone else you can really get close to the specific part and talk to it. It's great...

We are completely immersed in sounds and we don't even pay attention. So my goal is to be mindful not just in this but in every aspect of my life. Sound is part of being aware of what is happening around me. It's being here, present. (Laura, 7/10/2017)

Beyond taxonomies

I listen to a lot of different kinds of music. I try and keep a diverse view of what music is and can be. In order to force myself to listen to music I do a podcast (it used to be a radio show). It forces me to construct a way of going from one thing to another. I find that writing down something or vocalising it helps me remember sounds.

I listen to a lot of punk and noise music and stuff like that. I like the cathartic experience of really visceral, raw harsh noise as well because I like the idea of something being almost indescribable. It's just an overwhelming sensation that blocks that kind of thinking about what's this, what's that...I find just the act of even sitting on the tram or walking, listening to sounds around you can be as rewarding as sitting down and listening to music.

My background is in computer science and data mining specifically so categorisation is part of what I do every day as a job. But that's part of the reason why I like things that challenge that for me. I like to listen to a lot of post punk music — that was kind of how I got into listening to more experimental sounds — and I was hearing how they tried, within a framework, to bring in other things...So that started to break down that taxonomical thinking, especially when you get to some things that are quite high concept and are difficult to describe as anything other than experimental. I like being challenged in that way. So I try to make myself not categorise, because then I think I have to just listen. (Michael, 7/10/2017, podcast.abstractparadigms.com.au)

On structure

I listen to music in a lot of contexts. On the radio, through a speaker at home, I go to concerts, it could be just popular music. I also go to new music concerts. For different musics I listen to them differently.

Do you stop and listen to the external environment in the same way you listen to music?

Yeah, all the time. When I'm washing the dishes I like to listen to the sounds. Sometimes if there's water in a metal bowl it makes a funny sound...

I'm interested in how you can listen to music and you get to a climax and then you feel like it's a whole piece. I'm just interested in what makes people feel uncomfortable about certain structures and what makes some people feel like it's a whole piece to them.

... it seems like you think quite structurally.

I never thought I did. I think recently I've just got into a structure phase. (Michelle, 6/10/2017)

Vibrational memories

I listen to music at home, in the car — never through headphones. I'm an old fashioned guy.

When I listen to music, it's loud music. Because it's the rhythm of the music — the vibration of the heavier sound that is more pleasant for me.

Do you see things in your mind when you hear sounds?

I imagine an image. It brings back the memory. All of sudden something comes in your head — what you have done, or that kind of sound or environment — from 30-40 years ago.

Do you have a particular sound memory?

Church bells. Because when I was a little kid, I lived in Switzerland, I was born there, and every Saturday evening they played the church bells for about 15minutes. And it was the most beautiful high. I used to sit somewhere, in a closet, and just listen to that sound. It was incredible. I mean I'm not at all religious but the composition of various bells, the sound is incredible. (Rudy, 7/10/2017)

Sound of weather, memory of place

It's absolutely self-evident that music triggers memory. I know everyone knows that, but it's interesting to think about that in terms of sounds that are not music. For me sounds trigger not necessarily specific memories, although I'm sure they're wrapped into it, but place.

So Brisbane sounds completely different to Melbourne. There's a lot of difference in the sound of Brisbane and Melbourne, and I don't really mean the inner urban environment, I mean more the suburban environment. It has a lot to do with different birdcalls, they are the obvious sounds, but there are other things too, like the sound of a thunderstorm coming.

Melbourne has thunderstorms now, but when I grew up here that wasn't such a thing. There's also a crispness to sound in Melbourne and seasonal differences too...The humidity of Brisbane does something very different to sound. Brisbane has two seasons — it's the humid or the dry. If you didn't know — if you weren't feeling the temperature difference — I reckon you could identify if it was the winter period and the summer period by the sound. It's thicker in summer.

I remember when I first moved to Brisbane, it was maybe a month after I moved and there was a moment when I was walking down the road in Highgate Hill. It would have been Spring, I remember the jacaranda trees were out. Part of actual fabric of suburban Brisbane is the Queenslander

house — very open, big gaps — it's all about getting airflow. And I remember walking down the street and hearing someone on the phone, having this really intense conversation with their mother and you could hear it on the street. And then mixed in from the next house, was Aretha Franklin. In that more traditional way of living, you are constantly aware of the sound of your neighbours. It's changing now sadly because of air-conditioning. But Melbourne is totally not like that. You don't hear the city that way.

My mum's Swedish and all that family is there so I've spent quite a lot of time in Sweden and it sounds completely different from Brisbane or Melbourne or Sydney for that matter. The forest in Sweden is completely different to the forest here. There's much higher rainfall and it's the moss. All the sounds are really muffled. The Australian bush is really noisy compared to Sweden. (Jonathan, 2/11/2017)

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 first set of sounds were played as sequence of samples but are represented separately here, accompanied by their responses from the participants. The second abstract sound palette is presented as a single piece to which the participants generally respond at its conclusion.

Figurative sound

Sound 1

Sound 2

Sound 3

Sound 4

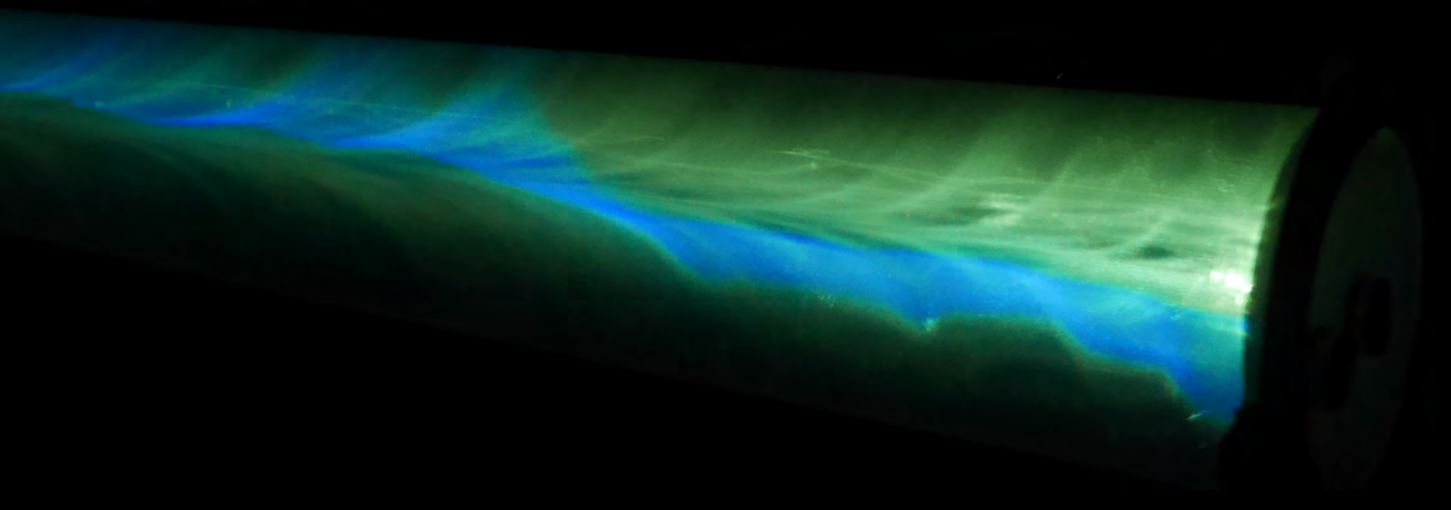
Sound 5

Sound 6

Sound 7

Non- Figurative sound

Sound 1





Can I ask you how you how you boiled the water. What kind of appliance did you use? Is it a regular old school kettle or an electric kettle? I think it makes a difference what the

water has been boiled in. [Juliana]

You hear volume. You can tell how full something is just by the sound of it. [Jutta]

You can hear the temperature. It's quite interesting because it breaches even the division between sound and image, it becomes sound and temperature — sound and touch. [Kate]

Pouring hot liquid into a Styrofoam cup? It sounds like hot water. It doesn't sound like cold water...high rustley frequencies... it's got a narrative arc. [Kieran]

Coffee? An Italian mocha? I'm not sure if that's because I'm hungry and thirsty. [Laura]

It's more crackly. You can hear it ascending. [Michael]

Pouring — I wouldn't know if it was tea or coffee... Is the sound of regular water the same as the sound of sparkling water? [Rudy]



The size of bubbles. It's starting to be a galloping horse — a couple of them. [Dianne]

I like that very much...the texture, repetition. It almost sounds electric in that it sounds like it's crackling. It feels very charged. [Juliana]

I guess the sound is reflecting, in the case of stove top percolator, off a regular metallic flat surface but also there's going to be a relationship between the diameter of bubbles of gas as they pop and the frequency of the sound they would make as they do so. [Kieran]

I love the sound of water. I use it also for meditation. I think it's really calming and related to where we come from — our mother's uterus. But this — I couldn't define it as calming — it's unnatural. [Laura]

It sounds like the bubbles are popping to me, but there's no roundness to the pop. It's like a square exploding or disappearing. [Michael]

It somehow has a calming effect. [Rudy]

It's boiling water again, but it's thicker. [Jonathan]

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



It is on that border of making your hair stand up, and I think the locality of where I'm hearing it in the headphones is changing. It's around me so it's more stimulating somehow. [Jutta]

ASMR really works on me. The texture of it — I like the texture. For some reason I imagine myself stuffing paper into my mouth. That's what it feels like. I see the image of me stuffing paper into my mouth. Even though I know logically that's probably not the sound. It's almost like word play, word association. I like the way it travels around. Is it binaural? [Kate]

Paper being crunched, in 360 degrees. [Rudy]

So maybe ice, ice cube tray cracking, taking out ice from a rigid plastic ice cube tray...It sounds too shiny to be regular paper. The sound has that audible reflection that you're going to get from a shiny plastic surface not a matt paper surface. There's some really high frequencies that will only come out of plastic. [Kieran]

I can't listen to ASMR. It's the vocals in it. I don't mind the sound but the whispering gives me this horrible intense feeling. It almost makes me cramp up and go "NO! STOP!" It's funny because its sounds like it could either be plastic being scrunched up or a fire. I don't quite know what it is but its sounds like, not paper, but a plastic wrapper. [Michael]



It's a random series of noises but it still it seems like it has a purpose and a sequence to it. I'm picturing a fire...I think I probably put myself in a scenario. I think of a lot of the things around the sound as well as what is making the sound. And I also feel very aware of myself within that space. [Jess]

Some of the pops sound a bit like fire crackle. But the rest of telltale fire sounds are kind of absent. [Kieran]

A fireplace...

Do you get images with sounds.

More sensations, feelings. [Laura]

The low range of that earlier sound I thought was fire, before this stuff came in. I can really hear a deep sound in it, like the fire is bellowing. [Michael]

It sounds like the crackling of a fire, which I like a lot. This is very pleasant. [Rudy]

Because of that background sound, it suddenly feels much more expansive — the crackles. I feel like I've gone from the domestic space into — I think it's a fire — but I feel like I've gone outside, and it's because there's more background I suppose. [Jonathan]



I love the sound of rain on a hard surface — listening to rain falling and how that sound changes depending on the strength of the rain and what's coming over. I always get a

real sense of sadness when I feel the rain starting to fade away.
[Jess]

It sounds like rain or water hitting some kind of surface. [Kate]

Its funny because however that sound, the rain is recorded, reminds me of TV static. Not really harsh TV static but the kind of on analogue TV with the rabbit ears, where you're really trying to find the channel. [Michael]

Now this scratching sound...sounds like an old record. What is it? Still water? The frequency is rather high so it sounds more like the noise of an old record. You know the needle on an old record before the music kicks in. [Rudy]

That's like rain, but specifically rain on plastic sheeting like a raincoat, the mike underneath a raincoat.

You respond very much to the materials rather than the object making the sound.

It's texture first, then you reverse engineer the object from that.
[Kieran]



In my head I see the classic image of thunder and lightening but then I also see myself for some reason indoors and it's at a distance, definitely at a distance. It's not threatening.

None of the sound I find particularly threatening, for some reason it's all quite comforting. [Kate]

And a thunder storm. I find it really beautiful. definitely it's not scary. No it's just the power of nature — knowledge that you're part of that power, from my point of view. [Laura]

Thunderstorm — I like it a lot. I imagine the images of a thunderstorm — but I don't see them. [Rudy]

I go in the country a lot and I love the grey and blue plain, the grey skies, the thunder, the lightening, the clouds. Because I tend to be a visual person it brings up visual images. So I do quite closely associate the two. [Jutta]

I live on a third floor apartment that faces west which, in Brisbane, is where all the storms come from. You can see them building, and rolling over the city. So that sound gives me very clear pictures of storms which are both exciting and slightly anxiety producing, because they can be really vicious. But that doesn't sound like a vicious one to me though. It sounds like a gentle one — that one's fine. [Jonathan]



Something elastic. Perhaps being plucked or flicked. Some other thing like a cymbal. It could be something from the storm — heavy drops. Something landing

against something where the sound bounces off. Then again it could be someone with a specific sort of guitar. [Dianne]

I'm really interested in the twangy kind of sound of something being stretched. Highly strung vibrations.... [Jutta]

The pinging, to me it still sounds organic, but just layers of organic. But what's happening in the background, there's something in the background that doesn't sound organic, like some kind of synthesised sound... [Kate]

A glass marble rolling on a guitar? [Kieran]

It's an instrument with cords [strings] but I don't know what kind. [Laura]

I like it - it's really calm

Do you get the calmness from the texture or the tone that you hear

It's more all of the stuff that's rolling around in combination with the single tone. Something static but stuff nicely rolling over the top of it. Do you think not having a structure that builds up and releases makes people uncomfortable? [Michelle]

It reminds me of opening your eyes on something really orange. But not in terms of the fire, I think of the fire now that I say it out loud. You know those shots in the first Blade Runner, with the pyramids and stuff over the city but with a real orange tinge. Maybe it's because of the envelope on the sounds that it makes me feel like that.

I get that feeling not *with* the sounds but *at the same time* as these sounds. I get a visual landscape. [Michael]

It's like meditation music, it's beautiful actually. It would be nice to lie in a hot bath and meditate to this. It's gorgeous. [Rudy]

Part 1



I find that kind of sound really difficult to process. I feel it's just happening to me, it feels very

overwhelming. The repetitive nature of what I just heard, I feel — attacked is maybe a strong word — but I definitely don't feel able to be in that sound. It's containing me and making me stand still. I can't think when I hear those noises. [Jess]

Yeah I can understand these sounds...rising, building up in texture. [Michelle]

You go from the outside inwards. It requires you to take time to actually listen to what you're hearing. Taking that moment to internalise it and in that interiority decide what are the feelings that you have. Where does it take you from there? For some people that could be a very cosmic journey. For some people it can be irritating or disturbing. But I think that's about individualisation in terms of the subject.

For me, since I'm speaking from the position of an artist who works with sound, I would say I understand it as a form, as a language. I don't see it as linguistic way of talking or communicating, I see it more as a new materialist way of thinking about how we are connected to this ecology of sound, or ecology of experience of sound. [Juliana]

This is about memory because I've got a permanent hole in one of my eardrums, so the first part took me right back to having my ears tested as a child, constantly. So actually the feeling of it was not good. It's a very strong association — it was all about different single tones and what I could hear at various different levels. It doesn't feel like that now because it's more complex sound.

I think it's also because it's a bit insistent. You're shifting it now, but that rhythm that's coming through is quite aggressive. It's also because I've got headphones on, the rhythm feels a bit agitated.

I don't know if it's about the inorganicness necessarily because I grew up on electronic music and actually it's mainly what I listen to. [Jonathan]

Part 2



I could describe that as internal space sound — the pulses, the build — more of an emotional zoning

rather than me trying to look for specific things. It makes me want to internalise more. And just concentrate on the sounds and what they are and how they physically affect me. It's more of a mindscape.

You've got the organic pulsing sounds that could almost be like throbbing in your headspace. And the other ones are like things coming in and zoning out, like thoughts — those kinds of processes.

I think there's definitely a drama going on and it's something that you're not sure where it's going to go so your quite absorbed in the relationships between the sounds somehow. I'm not necessarily looking for a meaning, I'm more or less just experiencing.

There was only one part early on where there's a trilling build, that was probably my least favourite part. But this is more, it's almost echoing some bodily functions maybe, or something that's familiar. The pulsing, and the boom boom boom — it's more internal and feeling-based. You build a zone around yourself with it. It's up to me to interpret. [Jutta]

I get more of an overall feeling rather than pictures I think. Maybe it's more abstract, it moves away from the figurative. I've never really thought of that. When you hear sounds that you can match to an image you automatically do whereas these sounds...It's like figurative and abstract painting in a way. I get an overall tone that is like an interplay of tension — building and dropping — climactic. I don't necessarily put an image to it. In my head I am joining dots with the little speckles. [Kate]

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Well the first thing I thought, I imagined myself suspended, even from the planet. I was in space, in a space ship or something like that.

I'm not used to listening to this kind of sound, so I guess my brain was really trying to recognise sounds and classify. But there's nothing — no images — and it's great. You can just suspend. So I might use these kinds of sounds to meditate instead of water. Definitely interesting. I couldn't listen for hours, but interesting because you can — maybe not stop thinking — but use your brain in a new way. [Laura]

So it's not any musical instrument. It's total chaos, it's total lack of harmony. This beep beep-be deep is chaos for me, as an old fashioned guy. It drives me up the wall. It's nothing that goes to my heart or soul. It's just noise. I can't relate. It's annoying. Angry is maybe not the right word, but I couldn't care less. It has no affect at all.

How much do you think not knowing what makes that sound plays into your reaction?

Not so sure. I don't really think it has a great impact. It's just the nature of the sound. The harmony is not there. [Rudy]

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

Part 3



It definitely sounds like sine waves. There's some pulsing going on, but I'm also hearing

the interval, seeing a relationship between the two even though I couldn't necessarily name the interval. That sort of third sound that emerges between the two, that is the flavour of the interval.

I guess the frenetic rhythm of the pulsed part is a little bit anxiety inducing. The white noise is quite intense. When it varies in amplitude like that it makes me think of a sprinkler or spraying a hose around — that hissing sound when you wave it around and it gets louder and softer.

I might imagine a hand on a volume knob or a parameter slider on a synthesiser...

I don't know if you've heard of speech motor theory. It's a theory of language comprehension that says that when we hear language there's a part of our brain that reconstructs the mouth shapes and tongue movements and throat gestures and that we understand the sound partly by imagining making it ourselves...

Yeah, so when that comes to acoustic sounds, naturally occurring sounds or acoustic instruments you can imagine that one-to-one relationship with the same part of your brain. When it comes to purely synthetic sounds, you're forced to imagine something that doesn't exist. So your mind is forced in to this imaginative space of what would a white noise generator look like if it was a real object in the world. How would you imagine it, beyond this circuit? Synthetic sound has that potential to divert you completely from any possible true answer. [Kieran]

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I love that undercurrent tone... it feels really nice. The really low sounds bring a sense of foreboding to the whole thing. Then the sound coming in from the top presses you into it. I find that very relaxing. You know how it can be nice to have someone lie on your back, or have a blanket over you — the pressure. And from that, the binaural sounds that come through are almost a relief to that pressure. I find it really non-threatening.

I suppose it's all associative. I guess you have experiences with sounds in the past that you can look back on. Other people might think differently just based on when they first heard sounds like that. But if you have never heard it before and you're in a different setting like this, maybe that can be confronting.

That oscillation, that rumbling and then the sound like a crank in the middle. There's this pressure building up but the pay-off is kind of scary. It's work.

Sometimes I like to not understand it, to not be able to categorise it. I don't know what I'd even call those sounds, because it's just not the background that I'm from — I like that. I like that feeling of the unknown. Especially when it's unnatural sounds. I like when there's a juxtaposition between natural sounds and non-natural sounds. Natural sounds you can describe, but when it's one that's completely foreign you have to appreciate it for what it is. Or not appreciate it, but that can be fun too. Art doesn't have to be appealing necessarily but it can make you feel things. [Michael]

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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photo Samuel James



