



WHAT NOW?
SYMPOSIUM

Crossing Listening Thresholds
curated by Regine Basha



Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence*, 2015. Land art installation and community engagement. Installation view, US/Mexico Border, Douglas, Arizona / Agua Prieta, Sonora. Courtesy the artists.

There is a lot to say about listening. But the point of listening is not to say very much at all. In this position, are we silent? Or just latently loud? Considering the modalities of listening and how it can be an active practice, many questions follow:

How to listen? And what to listen to?

What does listening produce? Who do we listen for?

Is listening the ear's form of voyeurism? A form of witnessing?

When should we stop listening? Should we believe what we are listening to?

Listening can be a shape-shifting way to move through the world, but it requires a commitment to subtlety, which is why it is not as often discussed in the arena of the political. I have been invited to host some listening experiences and thoughts on the act, in response to Art in General's symposium *What Now? The Politics of Listening*.

In my own practice, I have been listening to historical moments and sharing this experience with Tuning Baghdad Radio and have recently become smitten with the eerie listening phenomena of planetary sounds captured in the cosmos by NASA.

This leads me to wonder—can listening be a fetish? **Jeanine Oleson's** submission to *Crossing Listening Thresholds* has convinced me of such a thing. What hidden listening experiences have we yet to have? **Dario Robleto's** recent research into the pulse delves deep into this. I have also become fascinated with the work of SETI, whose mission is to listen to space for extraterrestrial contact.

Crossing Listening Thresholds covers listening in relation to contested geographies and expansive spatial concerns, generating alternative sonic maps that surpass our own crudely drawn borders. These concerns are taken up in the work of **Steve Rowell**, **Julia Christensen**, **John Dombroski**, and **Dombroski's collaboration with Ander Mikalson** in a Confederate Church in Virginia. The online exhibition also focuses on re-arrangements of language and sound into concrete and resistant forms—an approach found in **Valerie Tevere & Angel Nevarez's** hip-hop spoken word piece *Parley*, in **Hong-Kai Wang's** video where retired factory workers return to the work site to record the sound of their labor, and in the fascinating research that **Gala Porras-Kim** is doing with Zapotec whistles. Listening to the environment has long been a driving force for field recorders and sound artists since R. Murray Schafer established his position as a soundscape listener. **Charles Lindsay's** immersive live feed from the jungle, **Stephen Vitiello's** important early work with Yanomami Indians in the Amazon, and **Leah Beeferman's** more recent research in Iceland all engage with fragile ecologies using the vocabulary of experimental field recording. A seminal text by **Josh Kun** about listening to the border and to border music is included as a response and companion to **Postcommodity's** current project on the United States/Mexico border, which was discussed in detail during Kade L. Twist's presentation in the *What Now?* symposium.

Crossing Listening Thresholds reminds us that, in fact, our bodies are porous, our borders are penetrable, sound is a time-travelling medium...and a howling monkey might as well be sitting right next to us in our living room. We are all implicated in the soundscape.

<http://whatnowsymposium.org/crossing-listening-thresholds/>



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Jeanine Oleson

Breathe In

If you've never heard of ASMR (Auto-Sensory Meridian Response), it's a web-disseminated series of thousands of videos that (hope to) cause pleasurable tingling on the head, neck and back through mainly auditory stimuli. Whisper-y, sensitive, mostly attractive females "guide" you through a mundane activity that is especially designed to stimulate viewers to a tingle-y brain orgasm and promote sleep like some futuristic technology come to be. The whisperers are well-mic'd, so you generally hear the sound of the mouth and saliva while someone is easing you into any number of bland situations—from making a dentist appointment to back-tickling demos, to putting the camera/watcher to bed as a baby. It's intense role-playing which, although devoid of any overt sexual content, I definitely wouldn't hesitate to call fetishistic (or perverse).

I learned about ASMR from a performer (Lisa Reynolds) during rehearsal for an experimental opera I wrote and directed at the New Museum. In the libretto, all of the performers recite a series of lines together that basically places them away from Earth, having survived something, and fully ecstatic about the possibilities of the present. It starts out funny/uncomfortable and moves toward physical sensation and for the audience, a critical discomfort. The performers spoke the lines by pushing all the air out of their lungs in a rush which basically removed oxygen from their systems and made them high. It sounds like an intense, emotive vocality—kind of an ASMR for the stage. This section of the larger opera read as a relentless, spaced-out, cultish, uncomfortable and unfunny ecstatic arrival to an off-planet Space. I wanted to disrupt the normal reception of performed material and have a moment where it was really unclear what I was trying to achieve outside of any normal range of theatrical/musical tone and told the performers to believe in what they were saying (I literally said 'drink the Kool-aid' over and over again). Watch [here](#).

I think Lisa equated my direction with ASMR because of the tension between linguistic meaning and the way of speaking and listening that changes the performer's bodies and audience's expectations—it was more like enacting an ASMR video for a live audience. I started watching ASMR videos in the middle of these rehearsals. I was stressed out, not sleeping, and the Kool-Aid portion of the opera described above made me almost vomit with self-induced distress in every rehearsal because it was indescribably wrong and maybe right because of that. Somehow ASMR videos were that potent mix of soothing and laughable that is an optimal state of conflicted suspension for me. I was particularly into the sci-fi themes (I loved the sometimes advanced screens/graphics and future-kink narratives). Without thinking about the work I was making, or even relating to my work at all, I realized the conflicted

tingly feeling I have about, and due to, ASMR videos is very similar to what I was trying to achieve in that section of the opera.

The sci-fi-themed ASMR videos are still mundane, but they take on the outer dimensions of narrative that sci-fi is allowed to access having to do with mind control, systems, and a relationship to technology. Viewers depart from the typical mundanity into an alternate universe of procedural steps, such as buying a space flight ticket, being tested for ASMR border entry by an alien, intergalactic trading, real time space suit repairs, alien abduction, and android pathos. I REALLY like this— ASMR is so distinctly about comfort through technological transmission, and in the case of sci-fi, falls into the realm of technolust. They say sci-fi and pornography are difficult to define, but that you know them when you see them. In this case, it seems a bit like both. It's like the meta imaginary of the relationship between the interior Self, space travel and the web as a cognitive mindscape.

When EpicASMR uploads the final track in this list “Christopher and his drones repair your E-brain,” a rare male and (not surprisingly) very procedural track, we experience through perception, perhaps what our consciousness would be if we were a glitching system. In Heather Feather's “After the battle: Sci-fi suit repair role play for relaxation,” we see Heather as she works on our system, quietly at first, with data and inset screens, then building to identification images including knit alien toys in coffee (?) and spoken references to online gaming. It's interesting to also consider the role that the author's bodies play—women are tastefully clothed, pretty, and soft while men are more like technicians (oh what a sadly imagined future.) The comments are also FASCINATING—the fans and other makers in the ASMR community encourage and build on each author's work, protect against Youtube's indiscriminate censors, and gush for more. Sci-fi ASMR reveals present and future anxieties of disconnections in social interaction, and have found a cognitive space of safety and intimacy easing toward an erotic. As Olivia's Kissper ASMR channel says, “Warmth and technology don't go together? Think again!” In this awful world, it's some form of conflicted respite.

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Jeanine Oleson is an interdisciplinary visual artist who attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Rutgers University, and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Oleson has exhibited and performed at venues including: New Museum, NY; Exit Art, NY; Beta Local, San Juan, Puerto Rico; X-Initiative, NY; Grand Arts, Kansas City, MO; Commonwealth & Council, CA; Socrates Sculpture Park, NY; Diverseworks, Houston, TX; L.A.C.E., Los Angeles; Monya Rowe Gallery, NY; Samson Projects, Boston, MA; Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago, IL; John Connelly Presents, NY; Bates College Museum of Art, ME; H&R Block Artspace, Kansas City Museum of Art, MO; Participant, Inc., NY; MoMA P.S.1, NY; Pumphouse Gallery, London; White Columns, NY; and Art in General, NY. Oleson has received a Creative Capital grant, Foundation for Contemporary Performance grant, Franklin Furnace Fellowship and a Jerome Foundation Travel and Study Grant in 2009; a Brooklyn Arts Council Community Arts Regrant (2008 and 2009); and a Professional Development Fellowship, College Art Association (1999–2000); and was in residence at Smack Mellon Studio Program, NY. Oleson is an Assistant Professor of Photography in the Department of Art, Media, and Technology at Parsons the New School for Design.

<http://whatnowsymposium.org/jeanine-oleson/>