

Consonance and Reverberation

introductory remarks at the opening of the TONSPUR 36 installation by Dawn Scarfe

Do You Hear What I Hear?

by Hannah Schwegler

It is enriching to follow Dawn Scarfe's activities as both an artist and a researcher. It is important for me to emphasize the simultaneity, because that is what makes her works so stimulating. On the one hand the searching, the research and the questions, which she then poses, on the other hand, in an artistic, an aesthetic context.

At one of our meetings, Dawn Scarfe took me to her studio, put a pair of headphones on me, and asked: "What do you hear?" I hesitated, paused and asked myself, "Yes, what am I actually hearing?" Embarrassed, I offered a few conjectures: "Motor noises? Yes, there was this hum, horns honking!" At the same time, I asked myself whether I could be sure of it, or if I wasn't imagining it all because I absolutely had to make sense of the noise I was hearing.

This encounter succinctly demonstrates what goes into the work of the artist – shows what her intentions are in her artworks and research activities, and what she demands of us as visitors and perceivers. The artist makes offers, listening offers. With simple instruments, tools and methods and with a simple question, "What do you hear?" or, as in the piece that opens today: "Do you hear what I hear?"

And my question to you today is:

"Have you ever tried to hear to a certain tone in the traffic noise around the corner? A low C, for example?"

With this question, I would like to invite you to perform a mental experiment for a few minutes. An experiment about hearing, listening, listening intently, overhearing – an invitation to prick up your ears or even to "stretch the ear", as Jean-Luc Nancy writes in his essay *Listening*.¹

In today's piece, the focus lies on the act of hearing. What we hear are sounds, or rather noises filtered by so-called *Listening Glasses*.

Listening Glasses are glass objects that the artist had custom made by John Cowley, a scientific glassblower at the University of London. She was inspired to do this, as has often been the case in her works, by the physicist and physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz. His natural scientific research activities were among the most eclectic of the 19th century. In

1 Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy: *Listening*, Charlotte Mandell, trans., New York: Fordham University Press 2007, p. 5.

connection with the listening glasses, his intensive investigation into the physiology of hearing and seeing, and his resulting 1863 study, *Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik* [On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music] are of interest. In the book there is an exact description of so-called resonators, as well as instructions for their construction and use. The resonators are hollow forms whose vibrating volumes of air generate sound. Resonators have two openings, a funnel-shaped one that can be placed in the ear, and a second, somewhat larger opening toward the outside. The interesting thing about resonators is their distinct proper resonance. This generates the following effect:

“If we apply a resonator to one ear, most of the tones produced in the surrounding air will be considerably damped; but if the proper tone of the resonator is sounded, it brays into the ear most powerfully. Hence any one, even if he has no ear for music or is quite unpracticed in detecting musical sounds, is put in a condition to pick the required simple tone, even if comparatively faint, from out of a great number of others. The proper tone of the resonator may even be sometimes heard cropping up in the whistling of the wind, the rattling of carriage wheels....”²

The material in this TONSPUR sound composition is road noise, filtered through listening glasses. If the vibration of the noises of passing traffic corresponds to the resonance of one of the listening glasses, a harmonious tone is clearly audible. Otherwise, the noises seem dampened and coat the TONSPUR passage with an ambient-like sound.

What kind of sound is transferred to an object, which sound by which form, what material this depends on and *when* both can be made to vibrate, that is, be in accord: this is what interests the artist. Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of sonorous matter, which is “precisely what, while still remaining matter (voluminous and impenetrable [...]), spreads out in itself and resounds in [...] its own spacing”³. The fascination lies in the plasticity of a sound, the relationship between sound and form. This is the reason for the artist’s intensive involvement with glass and its sound. That is why she had the listening glasses built. Because “the spherical form and the reflective material” generate a special atmosphere in their sound.

The question arises, what is stimulating nowadays about hearing the noise of our cities and streets through listening glasses?

Along with the listening experiments of a former century, the artist has also been inspired by current sound artists and researchers such as R. Murray Schafer. One of his most interesting

2 Hermann von Helmholtz: *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, London: Longmans, Green 1912, pp. 43-44.

3 Nancy, *Listening*, p. 40

listening instructions in his book *The New Soundscape* is designed to prompt listeners to pause and open themselves to the noisy acoustic environment. Humming motors, rattling streetcars, cabs, bicycles and pedestrians – honking, rattling, clopping hooves, bells, laughter, shouts, scraps of conversation, mobile phone ringtones and more ought to be consciously heard. Schafer calls for us to listen with a sense of responsibility for that which sounds around us.⁴ And so it is one of Scarfe’s main aims to encourage reflective listening. That is, to listen attentively and consciously, and to think about what one has heard. In the listening glasses or even more in the listening experiment with them, the artist sees an opportunity for the perceiver to come up against possible questions. Questions that are also her own and that she conveys. Questions about listening. What influences our listening? Upbringing? Experience? Our acoustic environment? How do we actually listen? What do we perceive through our ears, what don’t we? What do we identify with our sense of hearing as noise, as sound, as music?

What we listen to here is fundamentally a far cry from what we are trained to hear in our “advanced civilization”: music – highly complex forms, finely orchestrated sounds, subtly differentiated rhythms, etc. Listening to music is often linked with the search for meaning – with the differentiation between music and noise, between melodious sound and interference, between meaningfulness and rubbish. Paul Valéry once formulated it as follows: “With *noise* one thinks of the causes that produce it, of a readiness to act, of reflexes – But not of a whole array, a family of intrinsic sensations.”⁵ Here, however, listening does not mean finding a meaning or connection behind the noises and sounds. On the contrary, this piece wants to touch on the excitement in noise.

Jean-Luc Nancy asks: “What secret is yielded – hence also made public – when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself?”⁶ To which I add the artist’s question: “What shows itself to us, what emerges when we devote ourselves to discerning a single tone?” The appeal of the listening glasses, especially the appeal in listening intently through the listening glasses, lies in the phenomenon of resonance. Described in purely technical terms, resonance means: a body is excited by an external frequency. If this is the same as the proper frequency of the vibrating body, one speaks of resonance.⁷ *Resonare* or *to resound* means to

4 R. Murray Schafer: *The New Soundscape*, 1968

5 Paul Valéry; *Cahiers/Hefte*, ed. by Hartmut Köhler and Jürgen Schmidt-Radefeldt, Vol. 6, Frankfurt: S. Fischer 1993, p. 82.

6 Nancy, *Listening*, p. 5.

7 Thomas Görne: *Tontechnik*, Munich: Hanser 2002, p. 56.

reverberate. The word also suggests *respond to*. Attention and perception, according to the philosopher of media Dieter Mersch, then becomes the discovering of a relationship, not just intentional, but *responsive*.⁸ Taking this thought further, resonance is also the sympathetic vibrating or resonating of a body with its environment. The outside, the environment, reverberates within the body. Resonance is a reference point, the link, the *in-between* between a vibrating body and the surrounding sound. Bodies are made to vibrate in that they pick up resonance. “To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated.”⁹

The excitement lies in the interplay of form, the characteristic sound of the glasses, and their acoustic environment. In her own unique way, Dawn Scarfe makes a connection between science and art. Between the technical, or rather acoustic, phenomena that she makes accessible to us – via the construction of the listening glasses, for instance – and our own perception, our own sentience through the senses, in this case, through the ear. She does not merely feed our senses with a new sound, a new shrill tone that drowns out everything else – doesn’t allow us *not* to listen, forces us to listen. On the contrary, she lets listeners themselves become active, prick up their ears; allows for listening perception and listening thought. The quotidian act of listening becomes a creative act. An act that invites us to listen to sound with the inner ear. “Do you hear what I hear?”

8 Dieter Mersch: *Ereignis und Aura*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 29.

9 Nancy, *Listening*, p. 14.