

# Radical Receptivities

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By Elana Mann and Juliana Snapper



ARLA: Resonate! Receive!, performance detail, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, October 2011. Photo: Jean-Paul Leonard.

## **I. ARLA & OLA**

*To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically... Understanding and interpreting what the ear transmits to the brain is a process developing from instantaneous survival reactions to ideas that drive consciousness.*

– Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (2005)

Elana Mann and Juliana Snapper began investigating receptivity as part of a four-woman group called ARLA (a mobile acronym for Audile Receptives Los Angeles or A Ripe Little Archive...), a Los Angeles-based collective they founded in the spring of 2011 with Vera Brunner-Sung and Kristen Smiarowski. The collective came together with a shared interest in exploring and expanding the active listening strategies developed by the composer Pauline Oliveros. Oliveros, an American composer and improviser central to the development of post-war electronic art music, originated social technologies around sound known as “Deep Listening” and “Sonic Awareness.” ARLA began meeting to discuss readings and to perform both Oliveros’ work and their own experimental scores, in living rooms and open spaces throughout Los Angeles.

ARLA’s decision to bring their work to Occupy Los Angeles (OLA) took shape while they prepared their first public performance for the Getty Museum in October 2011. That first performance engaged groups of mixed ages to investigate sound perception and sonic memory. Participants donned connective ponchos and lifted huge ears into the air for Listening Parades. Part spectacle, part sound scavenger hunt, the parades snaked across the vistas and gardens of the Getty, then regrouped for vocal interplay and dialogue about the experience. Related actions were performed at OLA, but took on different stakes within the highly charged environment of Los Angeles City Hall, the location of the OLA encampment until the November 30 eviction.

## **Reflections on ARLA at OLA**

The OLA library, where we met up for our first OLA performance in November 2011, was dimly lit, with small groups of people gathered here and there talking. Since it was nighttime the visual stimulation of the encampment was muted, but the sonic environment was incredibly dense and hectic. Amidst the roar of circling helicopters and the constant motor tide of downtown Los Angeles traffic, it was hard to hear small sounds that are unconsciously grounding, like the breath of people around you.



Members and collaborators of ARLA (Paula Cronan, Juliana Snapper, and Elana Mann) participate in a General Assembly at Occupy LA, City

Hall, November 11, 2011. Photo: Carol Cheh.

Our group consisted of Occupiers, activists, writers, and artists. We handed around sheets of paper with questions like: How can we hear voices that aren't the loudest? How do we get our bodies to be receptive and hear different layers of language and voice? How can we deal with overwhelm and still stay open? How does conflict impair ways of listening? How do we stop anxiety listening (when one feels hunted)?

We began parading around the encampment holding giant papier-mâché ears and were greeted with shouts of glee and recognition. Calls of "Can you hear me?", "I am listening!", and "It's a Van Gogh parade..." resonated throughout the space.

As we gathered back at the library to perform some more pieces and talk, a fantastic dialogue emerged. Participants discussed silence and power, how sound aided or hindered activism, and how listening was or was not functioning at OLA. The occupiers that were part of our group said that they found the whole experience powerful and invited us to come back weekly. They said there were few if any opportunities to get together as people aside from gathering around a particular issue or problem. The group appreciated the opening of a space to meet each other as humans instead of as combatants or allies. We then attended the General Assembly with our sculptural and physical ears out, drawing more laughter and applause.

## II. ARTISTS' REFLECTIONS

*Destined for the ear of another, the voice implies a listener—or better, a reciprocity of pleasure.*

- Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005)

### Elana Mann

My artwork explores empathy, currency, and communication through various media. I seek out political and social spaces where traditional notions of power break down and cracks emerge. Since 2005 I keep returning to the act of listening in my artwork and I view active listening as an extremely disruptive sociopolitical act. I am fascinated with the ways listening can produce embodied empathy and understanding between disparate bodies.

Co-founding ARLA was interrelated with my own investigations of listening through the body, and the research and performances I have done with the collective have expanded my ideas enormously. Previous to my studies of Oliveros, I had a very narrow notion of what listening was, which mostly consisted of paying attention to words and intonation. I only thought about listening in relation to conversation, never even considering dialogues with the sounds of one's environment, deep listening to one's interior noises, the politics of the voice beyond words, or the aural resonance of memories. I realized I was not alone in my lack of listening skills: Oliveros herself claims many trained musicians don't even know how to listen in an expanded way.

When the Occupy movement began, I knew ARLA's artwork involving listening and empathy was directly applicable and important in this new activist context. The Occupy movement feels like a giant Deep Listening session, where voices of the disenfranchised are suddenly being heard in a public space. The movement as a whole promotes consciousness raising on a national and international level and encourages active listening of the concerns of people who have been silenced for a long time. It's as if #OWS helped the country tune into a new frequency. Those who participate in the Occupy movement are looking toward each other for ideas and inspiration rather than the political agendas of those already in power. In a time when we are witnessing an unprecedented dearth of listening in both political and social spheres, this person-to-person work is tremendously valuable.



ARLA (L to R: Juliana Snapper, Vera Brunner-Sung, Elana Mann, Kristen Smiarowski) at the Getty Museum Lecture Hall, October 2011. Photo: Jean-Paul Leonard.

### Juliana Snapper

In 2007 I gave a talk at a conference of feminist musicologists. I described the biomechanics of sound as a form of touch that activates the listener's whole body—not just the ears, but skin and bones—going deep into our neuro-physiological (and thereby our emotional, intellectual, etc.) selves. My audience was filled with experts on sound so I presented this matter-of-factly as a foundation for a more thorny argument. But instead of juicy questions about my talk, the entire Q&A period was a string of outraged composers, theorists, and ethnomusicologists explaining

that THEY had never been penetrated by another woman's voice! I was stung that my peers (feminists?!) snagged on what seemed the least controversial aspect of my talk and felt the need to defend their (hetero-sonic?) boundaries.

But I also had to admit that, outside of musical contexts, the need to protect my body from the sounds around me is something I can relate to.

Experiencing another's voice as literally getting under the skin can be ecstatic. It can also be overwhelming, even threatening—in a crowd, for example, or when talking with somebody who is upset or aggressive. The penetrative aspect of sound makes it as potentially horrifying as it may be personally moving. Sonic weaponry, like the LRAD cannons recently used by police at Occupy Wall Street, is so onerous because we can't see it coming, can't keep it from getting in! Since we cannot close our ears like we close our eyes, we negotiate what we let in by how we direct our attention. Oliveros articulates this by distinguishing between hearing (physical stimulus) and listening (what we attend to).

We sometimes talk about listening as part of a trade system with the potential to wipe you out or make you a winner. For example, when we give our ear to something that does not yield useful information, entertain us, or act as a networking opportunity we might say we were "robbed" of time and energy. In this familiar framework, your attention is a form of capital and it's up to you to maximize the return on your aural investment. But this conceptual economy leaves many of us feeling depleted and disconnected. We need to come together to cultivate new ways of exchange.

The People's Microphone was developed at OWS to counter the attempted suppression of protest by forbidding the use of PA systems or megaphones. The system is activated by the rally cry, "Mic check!", which cues an assembled group to give its attention to an individual speaker, and then repeat loudly in unison that individual's words. ARLA is excited to begin work with The People's Microphone. This technology has already demonstrated how we can value and propagate the individual voice while learning how, without agreeing or arguing, we can experience an individual expression as both specific to the individual, and something shared by a diverse group.

### III. PERFORMANCE SCORES

*Compassion and understanding come about from listening impartially to the whole space/time continuum of sound, not just what one is presently concerned about. In [listening] this way discovery and exploration can take place. New fields of thought can be opened and the individual may be expanded and find opportunity to connect in new ways to communities of interest.*

- Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (2005)

Moved by the empathetic power of the People's Mic, Juliana and Elana have created the following related performance scores.

#### **People's Microphony Meditation (2011)**

For three or more voices or instruments

Sitting, standing, or laying in a circle, within the Occupy movement or outside of it, explore a mandala of political issues through sound. Employ the following three vocal trajectories, in no particular order: Unison: more than one voice uttering the same exact sounds simultaneously, as if they are a single body. Polyphony: multiple independent voices each sounding his or her own expressive thread simultaneously to form an infinitely complex sonic weave. People's Microphony: many voices responding to a single voice by repeating her utterance as a group, embodying and amplifying her self-expression.

#### **People's Microphony Caroling (2011)**

For any number of voices

Walk door-to-door in a neighborhood. (Consider simple costumes or props to distinguish you from process servers, evangelicals, and predatory lenders.) Explain to the person or people who answer the door that you are caroling, and ask them if they will share a thought or two related to the economy/politics/society/culture to be caroled. Voice their statements, whatever they are, as a group with full-throated clarity using the People's Mic technology. Variation: Instead of doorsteps, visit makeshift or alternative residences, ATM machines, malls, foreclosed properties, stalled building sites.



Elana Mann leading a listening parade during ARLA: Resonate! Receive!, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, October 2011. Photo: Jean-Paul Leonard.

#### **IV. PEOPLE'S MICROPHONY CAMERATA (PMC) AND CALL FOR SCORES**

Currently, ARLA is producing a project called the *People's Microphony Camerata* (PMC), a choir inviting the people of Los Angeles to join in exploring the emergent phenomena of the People's Mic. PMC will meet weekly for rehearsals in various locations throughout the city where members' voices, ears, and connections to each other will be honed, and together we can tease out this new technology. Each rehearsal will include a new piece written specifically for PMC by composers, artists, poets, and activists both local and international (see call below). Rehearsals will be recorded and will culminate in public occupation-concerts. All voices are welcome.

##### **Call for Compositions/Scores/Directions/Music TO BE DISTRIBUTED WIDELY**

Calling out to artists, musicians and writers of all kinds: The People's Microphony Camerata (PMC), based in Los Angeles, CA, is seeking pieces that explore the human microphone technology developed by the Occupy movement. Beyond projecting an individual's voice further than it can resonate on its own, The People's Mic has implications for all of the bodies in its vicinity. It energizes listeners in ways the microphone or megaphone cannot by making listening active, vocal, and embodied.

We encourage you to consider these and other questions as you write: What are the implications—personal and social—of repeating someone else's utterance out loud? How does the act of repetition through different and multiple bodies affect meaning? What happens when vocal sounds outside of language are introduced? Where are the sonic, architectural, dramatic and social limits of the People's Mic?

All media are welcome. Scores can relate more or less to music, theater, performativity, space, context, and/or visual elements, etc., but must involve multiple voices. Non-traditional graphic or text-based scores preferred. Selected pieces will be performed at public occupation-concerts and all submissions will be available through the web and an eventual publication. Email questions and/or submissions to: [elanamann@gmail.com](mailto:elanamann@gmail.com).