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**Joyful Militant Sonic Cyberfeminism**

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**What does thinking through or with the sonic help to demonstrate, in the broad range of issues present in cyberfeminism, differently to – or in convergence with – the visual?**

**3341 words (incl footnotes, bibliography and title page)**

It would be easy to assume that sensory experience is a completely naturally occurring phenomenon: it plays a fundamental role in our physical and psychological awareness of the world around us. The way we relate to our senses is, however, as socially constructed as our ideas about gender; 'before the senses are real... they are already affected...through the particular historical conditions that also give rise to the subject who possesses them'<sup>1</sup>. The field of sound as we understand it only came into being in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when physicists began looking into frequency, liberating noise from the lofty confines of music and the voice. It is in this shadow of neglect that the current range of sonic analysis sits, waiting for the cyberfeminists to come and utilise it in their inquiries into their bodies, both real and virtual.

Unable to critically analyse our historical exclusion of sound as an integrated part of understandings of human consciousness, the theory of sound seems to have been constructed as an extreme fetish, placing sound concomitantly in the realm of the 'divine'<sup>2</sup>, 'primitive'<sup>3</sup>, and 'purely interior'<sup>4</sup>, magically capable of returning us to our *true* subjectivity. This deification of sound rests, ironically, on a history in which sound has essentially been minimized to a supplement of the visual, culminating in a situation where 'to take seriously the role of sound and hearing in modern life is to trouble the visualist definition of modernity'<sup>5</sup>. The fundamental distinction most commonly made between the auditory and visual senses, summed up by Robin James in her dissection of Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of resonance, is that 'in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 5

<sup>2</sup> For Walter Ong, 'the sonic dimension of experience is closest to divinity'; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 17

<sup>3</sup> Robin James, "Affective Resonance: On the Uses and Abuses of Music In and For Philosophy" *PhaenEx* 7, no. 2 (fall/winter 2012): 73

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 15

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 3

the gaze, the subject is referred back to itself as the object. In terms of listening it is, in a way, to itself that the subject refers or refers back'; in other words 'listening subjectivizes, whilst looking objectifies'<sup>6</sup>. According to Nancy, listening is the apprehension of content, and the act of hearing results from the *resonance* of that sound, an affective response in which the subject recognises themselves as the listener, understanding what they hear through the prism of their own experience. This process is differentiated from vision, in which we externalize the objects we perceive, distancing ourselves from them by understanding ourselves as being in opposition to them. Summarising the various iterations of this dichotomy in the 'audiovisual litany'<sup>7</sup>, sound theorist Jonathan Sterne identified the commonly held conception of sound as being an affective, temporal, immersive experience; whereas vision, in opposition, has been held to be an intellectual, objective and distancing one. Many issues can be found with this framework: its inconsistencies<sup>8</sup>, its dependence on the senses being considered (quite unnaturally) in total isolation, and, as Sterne himself identified, the way that it 'renders the history of the senses as a zero-sum game, where the dominance of one sense by necessity leads to the decline of another'<sup>9</sup>. One problematic way that this theory of sense-dominance has manifested is in the archaic categorisations of art by what is taken as its primary point of sensory engagement, which has resulted in sonic arts being completely sidelined from traditional visual media such as painting and sculpture. In the case of cyberfeminist art, the great majority of it would be classified as 'digital', resting on the almost pre-packaged sensory experience that engaging with technological forms

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<sup>6</sup> Robin James, "Affective Resonance: On the Uses and Abuses of Music In and For Philosophy" *PhaenEx* 7, no. 2 (fall/winter 2012): 67 [paraphrased]

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 15

<sup>8</sup> For example 'light, upon which vision relies, might too be understood as an immersive phenomenon'; Marie Thompson, "Gendered Sound" In: *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* (Routledge, 2019)

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003): 16

results in. Of course, there is a sensory discrepancy between interacting with digital work depending on the technology you're using, the physical space you're in, and your familiarity with or relationship to the type of media involved. However, many of the elements that the litany cites as specific to the visual, such as 'concerning surfaces', being 'about intellect' and 'removing us from the world', are things that we would hold to be inherent in any digital experience; you are complying with a parallel system of reality constructed in a screen, which is extremely different both aesthetically and materially from the world outside of the device. Whilst the case could be made that this is in large part due to the digital (through screens) being a primarily visual phenomenon, it is still true that sound encountered through a digital interface will be heavily impacted by this virtual objectification, othered into being perceived as the content of a machine, as opposed to an immersive and temporal sensation. It is exceedingly difficult to conceive of any sort of immersion that could happen in anything computer generated, including sound, that would not include an (at least partial) experience of alienation from our physical bodies; this makes the audiovisual litany a very challenging framework within which to evaluate sensory experiences of cyberfeminist art.

Despite the shortcomings in our historic conception of sound, there are many unique benefits that can be identified in art that thinks with the sonic, especially as it pertains to cyberfeminist explorations of the notions of gender. One such artwork is Annie Goh's 2015 performance 'GenDyTrouble: Cyber\*Feminist Computer Music', a 4 part sound piece that reimagined the way we conceive of and listen out for gender through a fusion of the 'mathematical-generative power of computers with an

emancipatory gender politics'<sup>10</sup>. Using a range of sounds either generated or modulated by computers, Goh created liminal sequences in which the listener is invited to draw their own conclusions from certain combinations of noise, each with a title and particular focus. Despite their unique points of departure, every component shared a 'strangeness and artificiality'<sup>11</sup>, the muffled feeling of the sounds not unfolding in any space at all, as if they were created in a vacuum, and simply soaked into the atmosphere. Trying to imagine a comparable effect being achieved in visual form, a situation in which depth perception or spatial context was removed, it feels like it would be less disorienting; perhaps this is due to the commonplace nature of computer constructed imagery, which we're comfortable with accepting as unreal without questioning. At moments, perhaps succumbing to anthropomorphic projections of the body onto technology, the sounds conjure an experience of entering, and being immersed, in a machine – almost as if the human body is getting dissolved, turned into the 'theory of cyberfeminist embodiment as a database of intensity rather than an object or singular 'body''<sup>12</sup>, cumulating around soundwaves instead of feeling.

There is very little that one could characterize as 'feminine' in the conventional sense in the frantic beeps of 'Meditation on Reproductive Labour', and yet they are all constructed from the scream of a woman giving birth. It is very difficult to imagine a visual work being able to so totally disarm presumed binaries whilst maintaining them as the sole source material<sup>13</sup>. Whilst ideas about gender are at the forefront of

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<sup>10</sup> Annie Goh, "GenDyTrouble: Cyber\*Feminist Computer Music" *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* vol 37 (Jan 2016): 78

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

<sup>12</sup> Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, "Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism" *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer, 1998): 55

<sup>13</sup> The problematics of Willem De Kooning's 'Women' come to mind

this piece due to the title, context and site of performance<sup>14</sup>, their presence is not fixed, nor prescribed; gender is present, but distorted beyond recognition. The ability for sound to mostly retain freedom from gendered associations in this context<sup>15</sup> is indicative of its extremely unique position regarding gender, that is, for the most part being exempt from projections of it. This is especially true of computer-generated sound, which is only very slowly working its way into the popular psyche as a media form outside of specific, isolated situations (such as receiving a notification or playing a video game). This means that the emotional vocabulary with which we understand generated noise is still very limited, relying on a much more intuitive emotional response to interpret it than visual media, which floats in a thick sea of terminology.

One of the most pervasive and politically coded conceptions of sound is the characterisation of it as a 'primitive' form, or, in the case of Nancy's idea of resonance, the view of the 'resonant body as a primitive, undifferentiated body sensitive to perceptual registers to which more advanced subjects and societies are desensitized'<sup>16</sup>. This idea was famously espoused by media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who claimed that the advent of the printed word solidified western's society's decline into a drily phonetic (and therefore emotionally stunted) visual culture, which ripped us away from the richly diverse oral culture we previously enjoyed<sup>17</sup>. Though, as Sterne states, 'we can do no more than presume the

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<sup>14</sup> The 2015 'sexing sound' mini-festival in Chicago

<sup>15</sup> With of course the exception of the moments of the female scream being fully audible, which contextualizes the noise in a way that is then difficult to divorce from gender; the argument I'm making here is about the inherent qualities of computer-made sound away from explicitly gendered contexts

<sup>16</sup> Robin James, "Affective Resonance: On the Uses and Abuses of Music In and For Philosophy" *PhaenEx* 7, no. 2 (fall/winter 2012): 73

<sup>17</sup> "In tribal cultures, experience is arranged by a dominant auditory sense-life that represses visual values. The auditory sense, unlike the cool and neutral eye, is hyper-esthetic and delicate and all-inclusive." Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, (Routledge, 1963): 93

existence of an auditory past'<sup>18</sup>, the lack of popular curatorial engagement with sound work certainly suggests that this othering of sound, and those with the ability to *really* hear and understand it, is still taking place. Theories of sound which take as default the subjectivity of white men not only actively perpetuate racism through whitening any claim to 'rationality', creating an arbitrary benchmark against which to measure and judge others, but also greatly narrow our scope of understanding of the multiplicity of human experience. Given the efficacy of these structures of marginalisation, the sensitivity that listening allegedly requires may not be available to the people, in the philosopher's mind, most capable of exercising it: through their existence in a society which has made a concerted effort to erase their subjectivity, they may not feel capable of validating, internalising or even recognising their subjective response to a sound. The same is true in the conception of sight as distancing: if alienation is a regular experience in your life, you may not be able to recognise it in a more innate (allegedly subconscious) process or notice its impact. In this way, marginalised communities face a double isolation, in which white power structures not only alienate them from themselves in the first place (through structures such as racism and class disempowerment), but then expect them to have exceptionally heightened sensory responses, as a way to validate the learned objectivity of white philosophers, and give them something to define themselves against. Sound and visual media that explicitly deals with the politics of embodiment therefore becomes extremely important as a mechanism for radical speculation with which marginalized groups can begin to reconstruct their understandings of themselves. Nevertheless, it's as important to recognise the imperialist and racist paradigms at work in our construction of these senses in the first place.

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction*, (Duke University Press, 2003): 19

In her interactive website 'blacktranssea.com', the artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley uses both audio and visual components to explore the politics of bodily autonomy, constructing a speculative history in which the sea refused to transport ships bearing enslaved people. The website takes the form of a game, asking viewers to answer questions to establish which route through the site they will take: a transposition of the consequences of living in a physical body (in this case, differentiated by race) into the digital realm. In this way, Brathwaite-Shirley has found a way to maintain the early cyberfeminist aspiration to not let 'the virtual medium...replace the affective and affinity-building functions of presence'<sup>19</sup>. Despite the experience being a solitary one, we know that other individuals must have taken the same choices and had the same outcomes as us, likely to have been somehow affected by this exploration into our collective history. The emotional intensity of the piece comes not only from the subject matter, but the cumulative impact of the meticulously developed audiovisual language, Brathwaite-Shirley's trademark: low resolution, choppy and busy animation supplemented with abstract spoken word texts and static, pulsating, looped noise effects, never pausing long enough to allow the viewer to fall out of their dream-like state. In both of these media, Brathwaite-Shirley embraces the allegedly 'low tech', glitchy sides of them, subverting our expectations of modern, clean augmented realities, usually accompanied by crystal clear recording (a legacy of our differentiation of 'interior' and 'exterior' sound)<sup>20</sup>; reappropriating both the technology and aesthetics of the 1980s and 90s, '[not] see[ing] the limitation in

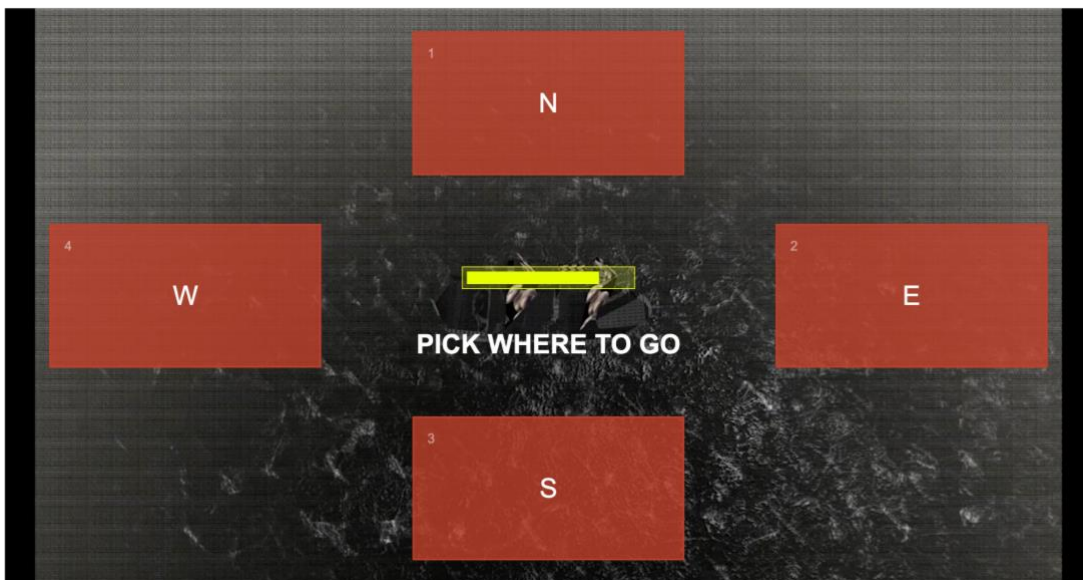
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<sup>19</sup> Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, "Notes on the Political Condition of Cyberfeminism" *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer, 1998): 53

<sup>20</sup> Defined by Jonathan Sterne as: "exterior sounds" (eg static) considered for their sonic characteristics alone, value-less, "interior" (eg music) as the useful content *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction*, (Duke University Press, 2003): 128



technology at that time. I see the limitation in people who were using that technology, and it was usually just white men<sup>21</sup>.



[above] various pages from blacktranssea.com

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<sup>21</sup> Shama Khanna and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, "Interview with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley by Flatness for Feminist Review and Women's Art Library, April 2021." *Feminist Review* 129, no. 1 (November 2021): 112

It's interesting to look at the cumulative power of audio and visuals when intended to work concurrently on the viewer, in comparison with works which focus primarily on either the audio or visual element. The power of these media combined does function (somewhat) on the level of the audiovisual litany: whilst the screen pulls our eyes in to the device, the speakers push the sound out, re-enveloping us in a wider scope than the mere surface we see the animation on, submerging us in what feels like a rudimentary virtual reality. In her performance of *GendyTrouble*, Goh decided to use the visual to support a serious and meditative interpretation of the sound, not challenging stereotypes of performances of computer music, but rather, saluting them. Sound is of course subject to the same extent of trends as visual media, though it doesn't seem to age as obviously or quickly as aesthetics do. This is most clear when considering *blacktranssea* in the visual context of cyberfeminist websites that have come before it, such as the archived site of the SubRosa collective's 'SmartMom' project. Created in 1999 as a satirical proposal for repurposing of military 'smart t-shirt' technology to surveil pregnant women, the archived website now typifies many characteristics of early cyberfeminist internet work, from the embedded links to domains that are no longer reachable, to the basic square-formatted web design centering around small typed black text and block colours. Had the work developed into the intended 'performative sculptural installation'<sup>22</sup> perhaps it would be easier to aesthetically contextualise it as 'of its time', but our understanding of the passage of time on the internet seems to be inconsistent with that of other media, in which the scale of change seems much smaller<sup>23</sup>. In this way

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<sup>22</sup> Faith Wilding, Hyla Willis, "SmartMom Rebooted: A Cyberfeminist Art Collective Reflects on its Earliest Work of Internet Art", *Studies in the Maternal* 8(2), (2016): 17.

<sup>23</sup> Despite being made 6 years apart, it is difficult to find much substantive difference between the styles and technology with which the sound in 'gendytrouble' and 'blacktranssea' were made; had a website been created in 2015 and not updated until 2021, it is very unlikely that no difference in style would be noted.

it becomes difficult to evaluate comparative auditory or visual experiences of cyberfeminist art made in different eras, as the work is so intimately tied to the technology it was constructed by and intended to be seen or heard through, which is developing and rendering certain file types obsolete all the time.

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It would be nice to hope for a future in which we can move away from reductive and isolating perspectives on sensory experience to a more nuanced and generally sensitive space. Unfortunately the proliferation of apps that place ‘sound... in competition with the visual much more closely than ever before’<sup>24</sup>, mean that the cultural power of the audiovisual litany is unlikely to break down any time soon, as capitalism continues to drive the atomisation of technological functions. As all of our senses continue to get eroded through being packaged and sold back to us, the precedence of commodification could spawn a new litany, one that focusses on differentiated experiences of the physical and the virtual. However, to the extent that you can currently separate them, both the sonic and the visual offer unique opportunities to explore experiential issues. They both work, in different ways, to make us aware of our existence and subjectivity, appealing to our subconscious inner dialogue; but in cyberfeminist discourse, it is perhaps harder to get away from the iconography of femininity through the visual than through sound, which is able to provide more open-ended interpretations. Additionally, due to the pace of technological change, sonically focused work is likely to have more staying power in future generations. Fundamentally though, given the multi-sensory experience of being in the world, it will likely never be possible to experience one sense without the other, and so the question simply becomes what mix of impacts you desire to explore your goal.

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<sup>24</sup> Violeta Giunta, Nicolò Palazzetti, “New Avenues for Listening. Sensory Culture in the Digital Age and the Persistence of Utopia: An Interview with Michael Bull” (2016)

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