

Listening appears as a research strategy: listening to remember, to resonate, to fill the gap, to unpack, to participate, to endeavour, to write, to read, to represent, to witness, to change, to resist, to learn, to un-learn, to dream, to imagine, to meditate, to fall, to question, to reveal, to travel, to envision, to feel, to wonder, to ask, to think, to navigate, to dig, to bind, to murmur, to say loud, to share, to commit, to repair, to speak out, to meet, to hear, to dwell ... in becoming.

https://wissenderkuenste.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/listening_elsa_guily.mp3

When the verb activates - Listening as research strategy

At the National Museum of Immigration History in Paris, the exhibition 'Paris-London: Music Migrations 1962-1989' focuses on how migrations have impacted urban cultural change in European metropolises, such as Paris and London.

Music combines various kinds of knowledge—of language, sounds as commons, and oral histories—as well as personal narratives.

As a cultural practice, music stands for memory transmission and thus remains a substantial tool of self-expression and empowerment.

Listening to sonic memory, my research aims not only to retrace the past but also, above all, to question historical narratives in the making of exhibitions.

It critically analyzes curatorial discourses and is a curatorial research endeavor in itself, which in turn underscores an epistemology of listening to material culture.

Listening to memories pursues a metaphorical dialogue between my own experience as a viewer while doing research in the field with the objects I encountered on display.

I focus here on the sonic quality of narrating in songs as a matter of making political claims and of critical action towards social injustices in society.

Listening as a research strategy emphasizes the agency of objects as they carry narratives of ordinary life.

My PhD thesis focuses on listening to artistic practices as guidance for the emergence of strategies critical of museums.

It draws from situated feminist and decolonial approaches, which have criticized the predominance of the gaze and the national museum as embedded in the legacy of colonial knowledge as a means of power.

As a journey through sonic cultural memories, listening at the museum as research means aims to challenge Eurocentric assumptions about the representations of citizenship belonging.

Asking how research on museum exhibitions might listen to the complex voices and transformative hybridity of citizenships.

,Listening to post-Algerian memories at the National Museum in France' understands the visibility and orality of postcolonial France as a means of contesting cultural and political modes of imperial domination inherited from colonization.

Listening to remember

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Listening to represent

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Listening to change

Listening to resist

Listening to learn

Listening to de-learn

Listening to dream

Listening to imagine

Listening to meditate

Listening to fall

Listening to question

Listening to reveal

Listening to travel

Listening to envision

Listening to feel

Listening to wonder

Listening to ask

Listening to think

Listening to navigate

Listening to dig

Listening to bound

Listening to murmur

Listening to say loud

Listening to share

Listening to commit

Listening to undertake to do

Listening to repair

Listening to speak out

Listening to tale

Listening to meet

Listening to hear

Listening to dwell

Listening in becoming

Highlighting living memories and their archives in conversation with objects at the museum, I undertake a shift in dismantling the imagined community embedded in the nationalist representation of “Frenchness” and the values of citizenship encompassed in whiteness.¹ Listening to sonic memories on display calls for a (de)constructive take to displace representations of memory in the public sphere or to “occupy the space of the museum,” as Nora Sternefeld’s institutional critique of the museum suggests.² This entails making critical interventions on and around museum collections and displays that individually sense the multiplicities of postcolonial perspectives and furthermore “undermine [...] the pretensions of nation-states as politically bounded territories marking the limits of ... homogenous cultural communities.”³ Listening to sonic memories seeks to address the museum display as a place of imagination bridging the past from one’s present. What if the museum were to engage in designing a polyphonic-sonic landscape that could enable different memories of migrations to circulate and echo with one another, as though they were undertaking a collective discussion that would share experiences? What if the silence of these memories were also a subversive strategy of resistance? Is the museum the place for them to speak out at all? Whose voices are authorized to speak on its scope and applicability?

According to Nikita Dhawan, listening is one step in decolonizing practices but cannot be the final achievement – on the contrary, listening as a strategy can also ultimately reproduce hegemonic “norms of recognition.”⁴

Dhawan sees silences, as an “ethical-political imperative,” as a strategy of resistance against the backdrop of those who have undertaken to speak for the “illegible and unintelligible within hegemonic frameworks.”⁵

In responding to Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Dhawan suggests “the process of speaking on behalf of someone else entails elements of interpretation.”⁶

Thereby, Dhawan argues, it is crucial that one continually make transparent the process of representation, namely, not only who represents, but also who is represented for what purpose and at which historical moment: “The responsibility of representation raises the question of who will be the ‘legitimate’ voice of the ‘marginalized’ ... this comes with the challenge of how to ethically and imaginatively inhabit other people’s narrative.”⁷

According to Dhawan, what is to be learned from this critique, shared among other postcolonial feminists, is that “instead of focusing on the supposed voicelessness of the marginalized it is more crucial to

scandalize the inability of the 'dominant.'"⁸

The elaboration of a process of thinking the exhibition together with artistic practices that guide the memory work by listening to postcolonial sonic memories makes it possible to retrace cultural history and the history of knowledge. Listening back to the sound of visual documents implements a disruption of historical dichotomies of the museum's display and, on a larger scale, within collective memory in France. Music of postcolonial migration struggles carries social memories, linking the present to its past and imagining a future that disrupts social order as well as processes of marginalization based on ethnicity, religion, or gender bias. Sonic memories can, in turn, counter-hegemonic historical narratives and propose to write history differently, in a decentered and complex way.

The approach to listening I draw from relates to two interconnected fields of practices - collective feminist projects and art practices as research of cultural memory. I understand artistic "memory work" as a process of research engaging with the past in both an ethical and political quest toward history.⁹ When we work with a pre-existent body of objects, such as archives or museum collections, we construct a literary, cinematographic, sonic, or historical narrative based on sensory interpretations of our object of study. By focusing on the sensing and affect encountered while working with data collections, the practice of listening in research renews methods of quotation and paraphrasing, cutting, and editing to produce a frame of enunciation that allows the object of research to constitute itself as a subject (the agency of the object).¹⁰ I suggest that, with a bit of imagination and a research approach based in this renewal, it is possible to listen to the memories carried by muted objects, to touch the sonic dimension of oral history, whether these memories are represented, only quietly, by an instrument, an archival document, or a photograph.

I argue that listening enables us to render visible sounds and their meaning. Alternating moments of writing and listening improves ways of thinking and making arguments. As sounds are nonlinear, the listening experience enhances our capacity of making connections, by creating relations to different perceptible elements.¹¹ My interpretation of the museum display is based both on my field analysis and on how I work with the data collection carried out while visiting the museum's exhibition.

In feminist practices, to listen to means listening to each other's experiences and thus situating each other's knowledge. Listening thought as a mean of making visible how we can relate to each other's as well as what makes us socially relate to each other. Therefore, a strategy of listening aims at reconsidering our understanding of the subject position and subjectivation modes - how do we speak, communicate make use of language? How can one receive the voice of the others as an understanding of the self, moving beyond the exclusion of difference in Western culture? In that sense listening as a practice endeavours to deconstruct the very idea of the enlighten universal Subject. When Western dominant cultures (see epistemic violence) and white supremacist modes of governance do not allow all of us to speak out and from an equal perspective, the feminist project elaborates on practices of listening as a mean of giving empowering tools among minority communities. Listening engages with reconsiderations of languages as form, as expressions and with sonic repertoire to listen to and break free with the self-others dichotomy, to struggle in turn, against the condition of being isolated subjects. The legacy of listening as a form of empowerment is not without echoing with the powerful text (and oeuvre) of the Black feminist poet-activist-thinker Audre Lorde - 'your silence will not protect you'.¹² In this sense, the practice of listening only works together with a politic of voicing (in circulation). It is not enough to listen, first and for most, the question is how to allow inclusive spaces for everyone to speak out, to voice personal experiences within situated embodied knowledge (Spivak, 1988). As the proposition¹² for feminist collective practices emphasizes - the resonance of voices as embodiment and relationality in the practice of communication, is crucial to every collective feminist project.¹³ In this view, the curator Lucia Farinati¹⁴ suggests, listening consists in 'emphasizing organs such as the voice, the vocal cords, the

ears that have constructed and reconstruct and inflect our language', as a way to 'open us up to our relational co-becoming with non-humans and our environment. Both sensory approaches of Tina M. Campt and Pauline Oliveros have particularly informed my willingness to listen to the memories on display as a manner of critically rethinking the way I do conduct my academic research and to think deeply about the visual materials collected while doing research. Tina M. Campt book's ,Listening to image',¹⁵ listening to memories on display calls to an understanding of what the encounter with their materiality provoke to me first as a viewer and then as a researcher. As Campt argues to listen to images undertakes to read the multitude of affects - asking, how the images resonate into yourself once you are doing archive research or work with a specific body of images entangled in the representation of racial and social violence.¹⁶ Within her practice of writing while doing sonic meditation, the composer Pauline Oliveros elaborates the idea of 'sonic memory' as a creative repertoire of association to enhance thinking in writing or composing.¹⁷

In her view to listen to surroundings applies to let yourself following the sound to the next memory image. In other words, it elaborates on how sounds create memory guiding our perception.¹⁸ Reading Oliveros' text 'Some sound observation' helps me to materialized how to think of listening as a core concept in the practice of researching on display.¹⁹ Pauline Oliveros teaches us on the possibility to enhance writing from listening practice as a way to pursue analysis and collecting data (dialogue, soundscape recording, interviews).²⁰ That is to say, to develop thinking that focuses on listening as a way of knowing, constituting one's observations on one's environment - writing with the ear and visualising with the ear. Olivero's practice gives light not only to the studies of sounds and music but also relates to a holistic experience of the environment through listening to sonic materiality. I read Oliveros approach of 'Deep Listening'²¹ as a strategy of perception to dwell in the practice of listening to my field research at the Museum, being attentive to the multi-layers of soundscape and how that fosters associative thinking. Such practice resists categorizing the senses. On the contrary, it acknowledges how interconnected they function in our practice of remembrance. Thinking with Oliveros and Campt, I argue that the concept of listening to memory in the context of the museum is first and foremost, underlining an attitude in drawing observations and doing research - creating a dialogue with the objects and not on the objects. Listening together with a reading of various feminist projects such as with the composer Oliveros or the scholar Campt, calls for enhancing the creative process of thinking and doing research at the intersection between art practice and aesthetics theory.

- 1 Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York 1983/1991.
Citron, S.: *Le Mythe national: l'Histoire de France revisitée*, Paris 1987/2017. Guily, Elsa: "Unpacking the Sonic Memory: Between Familial and the Museum, Remembering the French Revolution Bicentenary," *entanglements*, vol. 2, no.2, p. 56-73.
- 2 Sternefeld, Nora: *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, Berlin 2018.
- 3 Hargreaves, Alec G./ McKinney, Marc (eds.): *Post-colonial Culture in France*, London and New York 1997, p. 11.
- 4 Dhawan, Nikita: "Hegemonic Listening and Subversive Silences: Ethical-Political Imperatives", in Lagaay, Alice/ Lorber, Michael (eds.): *Destruction in the Performative, Critical Studies* 36, The Netherlands 2012, p. 47.
- 5 Ibid., p. 47.
- 6 Ibid., p. 47.
- 7 Ibid., p. 52.
- 8 Ibid., p. 51.
- 9 Kuhn, Anette: "Memory Texts and Memory Work: Performances of Memory", *Memory Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2010, p. 1-16.
- 10 Pink, Sarah: *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, London 2009/2015. Hubbard, P./ O'Neill, M./ Pink, S., and Radley, A: "Walking Across Disciplines: From Ethnography to Arts Practice", *Visual Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, March 22, 2010, p. 1-7.
- 11 Pauline Oliveros refers to this listening experience as having "sonic memory" while listening to her surroundings to enhance her creative writing. Sonic memories are the images that appear in her mind while she is thinking; in other words, they are analogies enabled by multisensory awareness. See Oliveros, Pauline: "Some Sound Observation," in: Warner, Christophe and Cox, Daniel (eds.): *Audio Culture: Reading in Modern Culture*, New York & London 2004, p. 102-106.
- 12 Lorde, Audre: *Your silence will not protect you*. London Silver Press 2017.
- 13 Farinati, Lucia: "Proposition #12 The practice of Listening developed with Lucia Farinati", in: Alexis Martin (eds.): *To become two. Proposition for feminist collective practice*. 2017.
- 14 Whose work and research focus on sound and listening in a collaborative process in the curation and production of events and exhibitions including radio projects, site-specific interventions, performances, talks and workshops which enhance collective listening as well as creating an ongoing archive of recorded conversations and interviews (see: <http://www.soundthreshold.org/>). 30.11.2019.
- 15 Campt, Tina M.: *Listening to images*. Duke university press ed, Durham and London 2017.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Oliveros, Pauline 2005.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Oliveros, Pauline: „Some sound observation.“, in: C. C. Warner: *Audio culture. reading in modern culture*, New York & London: Continuum, 2004, p. 102-106.
- 20 Her writing strategy could be also applied by the researcher while exploring an exhibition space: to dedicate a material description-analyse essentially focus on thinking with the sonic element perceived by the ear, which regarding Oliveros conducts to recall a range of sonic memories. Such inquiry implements a practice of listening while visiting and sensing the exhibition space (researching the field) in writing practice (both taking notes until formalizing article) and in the way to engage with participants (conducting the interview).

21 “Deep listening” stresses how to enhance our way of being in the world in a sensitive manner using all facets of our sensory experience - external, internal, and contextual. It improves within a contemplative discipline mindfulness-awareness meditation to clarify and deepen mental functioning in the way we perceived our environment from a sonic perspective (Oliveros, 2005). “Deep Listening” aims at building up analogies, to better connect the relation of body mind and speech in knowledge-making. In other words, “Deep listening” calls for resonance and echoes.