



Live Listening: Searching for a Signal with Elana Mann

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“Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.”
Pauline Oliveros¹

Is sound capable of political resistance? Can it be fine-tuned to resonate with a feminist agenda? Does it provide a means of intervention as well as refuge? Consider the eerie cosmic purring of icy comet *67PChuryumov-Gerasimenko* over 200 million miles from earth, or the echo-activist collectivity of the “people’s mic” at an Occupy Wall Street General Assembly, or feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot’s discordant denunciation of Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. These audio files can be sampled with a click at *Resonate Reverberate Roar*, artist Elana Mann’s growing archive of “experimental, independent, and socially progressive” sounds. Like early Soviet sound films and audio art, such as “The Symphony of Donbass” (1930) by Dziga Vertov and “Symphony of Factory Sirens” (1923) by Arseny Avraamov, *Resonate Reverberate Roar* refuses to be polite, rejects easy classification, and does not seek to soothe our souls or reinforce our expectations.

Mann is our self-appointed audio enabler, our contemporary noise wrangler documenting the tumult of protest while seeking to empower non-patriarchal modes of being in the world, including listening with the bottom of one's feet. She has created installations and social actions with strange gadgets of her own design. *Histophones* and "hands-up-don't-shoot-horns" are molded plastic devices that merge sculpture with protest art, producing a unique, sound-amplifying instrument that resembles a megaphone fabricated from a truncated human arm.² Cast in a variety of colors, each device is equipped with a stigmata-like hole located at the center of its gently cupped palm. With mouth to hole one's whisper is magnified. With an army of these *histophones* one can even fill up and overpower a public space, as when Mann armed a gang of street performers in Los Angeles, naming them the "Take a Stand Marching Band" (2017). Her sound sculptures also bring other references to mind, including Alexander Rodchenko's 1925 iconic constructivist poster showing a female comrade enthusiastically shouting the word BOOKS. Conspicuously, however, in the artist's depiction the megaphone is entirely absent. Instead the bold, typographic word КНИГИ substitutes for the agitational apparatus as if in true radical avant-garde fashion any division between a thing and its function or an object and its name is to be targeted for subversion.



174. Родченко А.
Ленгиз. Книги по всем отраслям знания. 1925

Rodchenko A. Leningrad. Books on all fields of knowledge. 1925

Mann also aims to unsettle structural hierarchies, most notably challenging the significance of the unique and autonomous work of art, with all of the male phallogocentric connotations that a seemingly indivisible authorial piece traditionally invokes. Her years of working with sound – a medium that is not only almost completely immaterial (though Mann’s work actually proves otherwise), but which exists primarily in time rather than in space – becomes still more understandable when viewed through a lens of feminist critique. This is perhaps most apparent in her 2012 collaborative performance with Audrey Chan in which the duo reenacted, in modified form, Leslie Labowitz-Starus’ project *Myths of Rape* (1977), itself part of Suzanne Lacy’s event *Three Weeks in May* (1977).³ Besides re-fabricating the picket signs of the original performance work, Mann and Chan appropriated the people’s microphone, used by the Occupy movement, to shout out myths and facts about rape, the most under-reported, and therefore seemingly “immaterial,” crime against women. The use of voice, both women’s and men’s, to vocalize the written signs, brings more materiality and body experience to the protest, which in the original performance, prioritized language.⁴

In her other sound performances, Mann uses sonic techniques generated by experimental musician Pauline Oliveros, who asserted that listening was a fully-embodied critical pursuit. But Mann diverts from the original humanitarian and healing purposes of Oliveros’ practice with the intent of producing a temporary state of radical collectivity. *The People’s Microphony Camerata* (PMC) choir from 2012, developed in collaboration with operatic singer and innovator Juliana Snapper, makes direct reference to the human mic made famous by the Occupy Wall Street movement that same year. Mann’s video, *These Vibrations Will Dissolve Your Debt* (2012) depicts the PMC—an ensemble of nineteen mostly women (including Mann and Snapper)—who, using Oliveros’ techniques of sonic meditations, lie in a circle on their backs while vocalizing wordless harmonic vibrations that the artists claim will “dissolve your debt!” Though this post-2008 polyphonic piece accomplished its stated goal by emphasizing collective synchronization, PMC encapsulates much of Mann’s artistic philosophy involving the mobilizing potential of attentive listening. In turn, these themes weave a thread through many of her projects, including the public pedagogical ritual *Grand Rounds* (2014), the public listening piece *Villa Murmurs* (2014), and her ceremonial performance *Searching for a Signal* (2013), part of which was created in collaboration with Snapper, and performed at various abandoned military bunkers along the California coast.



Myths of Rape, Mann and Chan, 2012

Almost as important as listening to Mann’s projects is repetition. Or more accurately, repetition and assonance, the latter being a literary device in which similar-sounding vowel sounds are repeated to create poetic rhythm, as in “and sore must be the storm,” from Emily Dickinson’s poem “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” whereby “sore” and “storm” generate assonance.⁴ In terms of the visual arts assonance might involve a series of plastic forms that repeat as well as modulate, producing a measured, optical beat. Mann’s installation *The Assonant Armory* (2016) does exactly that: a gallery filled with her signature human arm megaphones with some treated as classical museum artifacts mounted on tailor-made felt stanchions, and other *histophones* and *hands-up-don’t-shoot* devices mounted in such a way that visitors can either listen with them, or speak through them.

The Assonant Armory, with its pun on human arms and a warehouse for armaments, is also home to *The Donald Trump(et)*, which is perhaps one of Mann’s most ingenious, even outré conceptions. The work takes the form of a minimalist-looking cone standing on the gallery floor, which is fitted with an 18k life-casting of a human anus. Discussing the “asshole megaphone” Mann writes,



“The Donald Trump(et) ... does not allow any sound to pass through it. The constricted anus at the end of the megaphone effectively mutes it. I do not believe the anus to be an inherently negative part of the human body, but I do revile the act of ‘talking out of one’s ass,’ of which Donald Trump appears to be a master.”

In Mann’s evolving practice, what started out as an exploration primarily of sound is visibly morphing into a broad repertoire of bodily affect, peculiar devices and conceptual propositions. Like Pauline Oliveros, she approaches speech, perception and communication as a transformative body experience leading inextricably towards social action. Mann’s objects, performances, installations and devices are effective because they generate a productive tension between language and body, ideas and actions, as an imaginative and necessary life practice.

¹ “Meditation” No. 5, cited in [Kerry O’Brien’s](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/listening-as-activism-the-sonic-meditations-of-pauline-oliveros) “Listening as Activism: The ‘Sonic Meditations’ of Pauline Oliveros,” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2016. (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/listening-as-activism-the-sonic-meditations-of-pauline-oliveros>)

² In the years since Thomas Edison developed his own version of the instrument in the late 19th century (with the aim of assisting the hearing impaired) the megaphone has come to virtually stand in for acts of vehement public protest. Mann’s “histophone” form was cast from the artist’s own hand and initially designed to amplify “the whispers of history” at various out-of-door locations at the J. Paul Getty Villa in Southern California, 2014.

³ The reenactment took place at the Los Angeles Convention Center as a part of the Getty’s Pacific Standard Time Performance Festival in 2012. See also: Audrey Chan, Alexandra Grant, and Elana Mann. “Rupture and Continuity in Feminist Re-performance.” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 33, 2013. pp. 38-45

⁴ Emily Dickinson, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” first published c. 1891. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. By Thomas H. Johnson, Back Bay Books, 1976. p. 116.