

Radical Listening and the People's Microphony: A Conversation with Elana Mann



Members and collaborators of ARLA (Paula Cronan, Juliana Snapper, and Elana Mann) participating in a General Assembly at Occupy LA City Hall, November 11, 2011

Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening—Pauline Oliveros

“CAN YOU HEAR ME?!?” “I CAN HEAR YOU!!” “IT’S A VAN GOGH PARADE!!” . . .were some of the enthusiastic replies when artist [Elana Mann](#), musician [Juliana Snapper](#), and other members of ARLA ([Audile Receptives Los Angeles](#)) arrived on the scene at Occupy LA with giant hand-made ears. Mann co-founded ARLA in the Spring of 2011 with Snapper, filmmaker [Vera Brunner-Sung](#), and choreographer [Kristen Smiarowski](#). After studying scores and techniques on listening developed by composer [Pauline Oliveros](#), ARLA developed a workshop geared toward Occupy LA that included a listening parade in which they held up the giant ears and protest signs with ears on them. Snapper recalls, “The simple physical presence of people carrying large paper-mache ears was met with a kind of hungry recognition...recognition of what it meant that we were holding the symbols (giant ears).” They led workshops, listening sessions, and discussion groups. They performed Oliveros’ sonic meditation “[Teach Yourself to Fly](#)” and a composition written by Mann and Snapper entitled “People’s Microphony.” And a project was born. Through personal interviews and audio-visual examples, I document, contextualize, and analyze this work.

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Pauline Oliveros, 1974

TEACH YOURSELF TO FLY (DEDICATED TO AMELIA EARHART)

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Any number of persons sit in a circle facing the centre. Illuminate the space with dim blue light. Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible. Then gradually introduce your voice. Allow your vocal cords to vibrate in any mode which occurs naturally. Allow the intensity of the vibrations to increase very slowly. Continue as long as possible, naturally, and until all others are quiet, always observing your own breath cycle. Variation: translate voice to an instrument.

“I am happy that Elana Mann chose to use my Sonic Meditations for the People’s Microphony project. These pieces are meant for anyone that wants to perform them regardless of musical training.”
–Pauline Oliveros

For Mann, active listening is “a process of tuning in simultaneously inward and outward. Active listening allows for an awareness of and an opening up to sounds around me and also a digestion of what is happening inside of me in relation to these sounds.” Much of the recent focus on this practice comes from the music and sound art worlds, as well as acoustic ecology, a field formed from the overlapping area between science and art that concentrates on the importance of experiencing and investigating our sonic surroundings with detailed care and respect to understand its importance on our world and our place within it. Mann’s work addresses a unique angle at the intersection of these fields: listening’s empathetic effect on those whom you are listening to, a consideration arising from a project she worked on between 2007-2010 with Iraq war veteran Captain Dylan Alexander Mack, called [“Can’t Afford the Freeway.”](#)

“Can’t Afford the Freeway” highlights how her collaborations emerge as conversations between involved artists as well as the audience. Speaking to Mann about the project, she stated: Alex created some recordings for me and I kept listening to them over and over again trying to figure them out. I eventually produced more interviews with him and realized that he needed his story to be heard and I needed to try and understand his story. So I created a project in which I attempted to listen as best I could. Listening to his recordings made me feel close to him, but I also recognized that no matter how many times I heard his words they were still foreign to me. Still the very act of me struggling to listen was important for both of

us, and I think this is true of many interpersonal/political and social situations. You can never experience what it is like to be someone else, but active listening opens up a space of empathy and connection. I also think we can see how a lack of active listening is affecting the political landscape in the United States so negatively, by producing a highly polarized and vitriolic environment.

And what about at Occupy LA?

At Occupy LA I was hopeful that there would be a place for listening to voices that had not been heard before and sometimes that happened. Other times people used the space for projecting, not receiving. I think that there needs to be strong voices making themselves heard, but I don't want to lose the other part of that equation, which is those voices being quiet and listening to others, and themselves.



ARLA Ear Strengthening Workshop, Occupy LA site, November 11, 2011, Photo by Carol Cheh

Mann, thinking and researching about social, aesthetic, and political points of listening and voicing, felt there was something to be considered about the “radical receptivity and the core message of the OWS movement” and its global amplification of voices struggling to be heard. In the Spring of 2012, she formed [The People's Microphony Camerata](#) with Snapper, a radical experimental choir based in Los Angeles exploring the process of the People's Microphone. The exact history of the “People's Microphone,” or “People's Mic” is unclear, but its use in the Occupy Movement has already become iconic. [Ted Sammons](#) discusses the implications of the People's Mic for communication in his October 2011 post, [“I didn't say look; I said listen': The People's Microphone, #OWS, and Beyond.”](#) The human microphone is a way to deliver one person's message to a large group of people in situations where amplification tools, such as bullhorns, are either not allowed or unavailable, or if the acoustics of a space distort amplification. The speaker calls, “mic check!” to alert their intentions. Those around them call back, “mic check!”, until the gathering understands something will be said. The speaker breaks their statement into short sentences, pausing to allow those around them, or the “first wave,” to repeat them in unison. They then pause for those further away, or the “second wave,” to repeat again...and so on until those in the back of the gathering have heard the statement.

To explore the People's Microphone as an affective device, Mann and Snapper issued a call: *"If you know how to sigh, grumble, and laugh, then you have an expressive voice and something to contribute."*

The members of the PMC had varied backgrounds, experiences with art and music, leadership histories, and very different opinions on politics. Some saw the group as part of the Occupy movement, some saw it as a meditative or musical space, and others felt it more activist oriented. The scores the group received from an open call contained and provoked varying emotionality, opening the group up— after much practice and discussion—as an intense, but safe, environment.



Members of People's Microphony Camerata rehearsing in Los Angeles, April 15, 2012, Photo by Jean-Paul Leonard

The group's trademark intensity sometimes carried over to the audience. Mann discovered such transference often had to do with prior associations with a location or context. Mann recalled a particular performance at the Occupy movement called ["Chalkupy"](#) that was formed in response to a protest running simultaneously with the LA Art Walk, in which activists had handed out chalk and told stories of police repression while chalk drawings were created on the walkways. The police shut down the art walk and a violent struggle ensued. The Occupy LA movement called for people globally to take to the street with chalk in protest, and the day was called "Chalkupy". The audience of protestors was mixed and tense, and when the PMC began their performance of a highly emotive score called "Sob-Laugh" by Daniel Goode, people were either drawn to or repelled by the performance.



The PMC performing “Sob Laugh” at the “Chalkupy” protest in downtown Los Angeles, Image by Daniel Goode

I think there was some fear about the vulnerable revelation of emotions in the space of the protest. Many of the Occupy LA protests were so risky that everyone had to be extremely tough to exist in that activist space. I respect that. Still I think there are other things that can happen in a space of protest that bring out different feelings. Some activists wanted us to be more musically conventional, “why can’t you just sing some folk songs like normal protest choirs,” we were asked. But we really were not into that kind of thing.

In most protest situations, the audiences welcomed their activities. Many shared that it opened up a new space where people could meet each other as humans rather than adversaries or collaborators. Mann edited and published a monochromatic grassroots songbook with the various scores the PMC received for performance, opening up the circle for anyone and everyone to perform and feel that closeness.

Sometimes it was hard to translate a piece that worked during a group rehearsal to something for an audienceperformer situation. . The PMC never fully developed how to deal with audience participation, but this is something I have been developing on my own in working with students on PMC materials. The scores from the *People’s Microphony Songbook* and the techniques Juliana and I developed when we first formed the PMC create an immediate closeness within a group, which is remarkable.



From the “People’s Microphony Songbook”: *Many voices that were once silenced are now resonating through large crowds, not only of activists, but ordinary people all over the world, assisted by internet networks, and a simple technology called the People’s Microphone. The People’s Mic expressed the interrelated desires of collective and individual voices to speak and be heard, to hear one’s words spoken back through different mouths, and to digest someone else’s words through one’s own body. 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.* The project, like the Occupy movement, holds all the complexity, beauty, and drive of being human, whether you consider it “working” or not. When I asked Mann about how changes within and towards the Occupy Movement affected the choir, and whether they were winding down or taking a new form, she answered:

I think more than anything else, our group faced a lot of the same challenges that the Occupy Movement faced—challenges in horizontality, in the push and pull between interior and exterior exploration, in the sometimes painful vulnerability of investigating the intimate personal and political space with others. I think the project is still developing. The choir still communicates, and some members are currently collaborating with composer Daniel Corral, but the PMC does not meet and rehearse like we used to. I think it will continue to wax and wane. In the meantime, I am still working on ideas of active listening. I am currently creating a project called “Listening as (a) movement” within an under-served neighborhood in Pasadena, CA, exploring ideas of radical listening within a specific neighborhood.

In an age of constant bombardment of stimuli, our heads scream with thoughts, opinions, arguments, and expressions. With our current technology, our input and output can be a constant rush of snap reactions and impulses, which has a profound effect, of course, on our day-to-day lives, on our culture(s), on our politics. But these circles cannot be affectively complete without the other side. We need someone to hear us, and, more than that, we need someone to listen to us. And we, in turn, need to listen to them.

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