

GAIL PRIEST

SonoLexic: *the language of listening*



an audio-text to accompany
the installation *SonoLexic*
Experimenta Make Sense 2017-2020

version 2A, April 2018
The Lock Up Gallery

Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: SonoLexic

Part 1: The Big Bang

Part 2: Soundwordsnoise

Part 3: Perception & imagining

Part 4: Silent words

Part 5: Sound as narration

Part 6: Being listening

Chapter 2: Sound stories

The Lock Up Gallery, Newcastle, February 2018

Chapter 3: Listening notes

The Lock Up Gallery, Newcastle, February 2018

About the artist

Credits

Introduction

“Thought is nested in speech not in texts, all of which have their meanings through reference of the visual symbol to the world of sound. What the reader is seeing on this page are not the real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound.”

Walter J Ong, 2005, Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Routledge, London, New York, p73

Language of Listening is an e-publication produced to compliment the installation *SonoLexic*, presented as part of **Experimenta Make Sense**, touring Australia 2017-2020.

The installation

SonoLexic is a sound driven installation that contemplates how we process the listening experience through language. It playfully proposes a variant of synaesthesia — an intimate cross-modal association of sound and words. It poses questions as to how language plays into the way we understand and communicate the listening experience and alternately how words can generate an imagined act of listening.

The physical manifestation of the work is a sculptural object comprising a suspended plasma tube showing scrolling texts and sonic visualisations, reminiscent of a hologram. The sound is delivered via nearfield speakers with the voice emanating from an ultrasonic speaker creating a tightly focussed beam of sound that the listener may discover by moving around the object.

For video documentation of the installation see <https://vimeo.com/236397733>

* *Headphone listening recommended.*

The publication

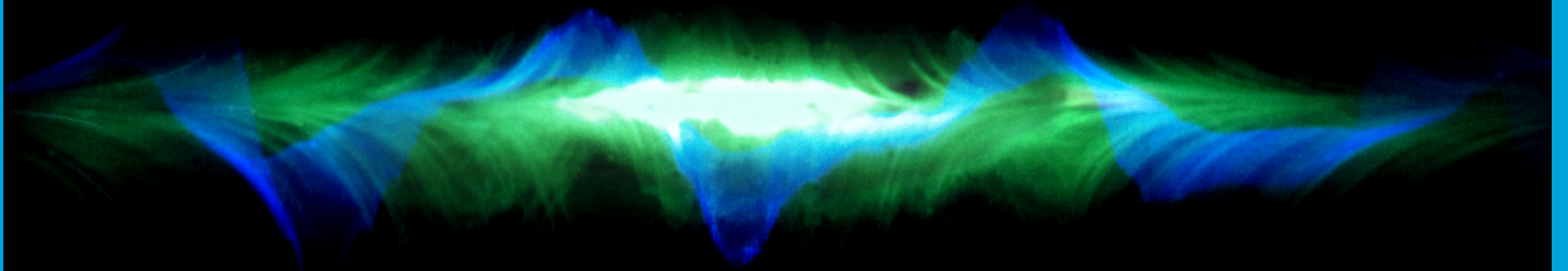
Chapter 1 introduces the ideas under consideration via an adaptation of the six-part text that comprises the spoken and written elements of the *SonoLexic* installation. This includes selected sound fragments offering a kind of listening-reading hybrid.*

The subsequent chapters present material gathered in interviews with interested visitors as part of the **Experimenta Make Sense** public engagement program. The interviews are one-on-one encounters in which I talk to participants about how they experience the world through the aural. I also perform a mini-concert, playing them a range of sounds, figurative and abstract.

I have separated the responses into two chapters: Sound stories, in which the subject shares something about how they listen; and Listening notes, their thoughts on the sounds they are played.

These interviews will be conducted in a number of the venues across the three-year tour of the exhibition, so that this document will continue to be updated and expanded.

SonoLexic



*We start with the word.
The word was sound
and the sound was word*

Some say that in the beginning was the word
and it was a heard word.
But that's starting in the middle of the story.

There was nothing,
then the beginning
and that beginning was a



A Bang they call it —
a big bang —
requiring an added adjective.

But in fact this is deceiving
as it was neither big nor loud.
Rather it came from something infinitesimal
and was completely silent.

But after the silent bang
it was all about expansion:
photons bumping and grinding
through clouds of plasma,
and for a while this could be heard —
if there had been ears to hear.

And even now we can just still hear
the growing pains of this teenage
universe
760,000 years young.
And it sounded a little like this....



*Where do the words go
after they have been said?*

*Where do the words go
after they have been read.*

But our ears came much later
and our words much later still.
And these first words were always heard words,
ears and mouths holding all they could contain
for thousands of years.

Until they wanted to add things up
and remember who owed what to whom.
And so words were scratched in stone, on
velum wax and clay,
first pictures, then units of symbolic sounds,
bs and ps and us, eehs and ohs ahhs....



Now that we could record everything,
Plato said, dictating to his scribe,
we would forget everything.

Now that we can record everything
we need two, three lives to play it all back.

Because sound rolls out in realtime,
all time, old time
and even the bang....that big one...
can still be heard on your AM dial.





Do sounds want to be wanted?

Linguists say that we are incapable of hearing the sounds of words without trying to make sense of them. Once words are learnt they cease to be sounds and are pre-determined units of meaning.

So for a moment
let us not listen to words....



You are listening.
You are listening to a sine tone made of a single frequency 198Hz, the musical note G.

A sine is thought of as the simplest of sounds:
no overtones,
no noise,
no image of the source that made it.

Yet the sound of the sine
Is no less a sign.

Do words have desires for themselves?

Noise is the most complex of sounds, all frequencies playing at equal intensity. Noise is often defined as 'unwanted' sounds, yet there is always a signal in the noise.



Sometimes words are noise.
Sometimes people are noise.
Sometimes feelings are noise.

Narrow your focus.
Concentrate.
Feel the noise.
Filter the noise.
Turn the noise over.



Perception requires updated input,
imagining uses what we already have in store.

Hearing is perception.

Listening is perception + imagining,
telling ourselves the story of what we hear.

Do you have sonic memories?

When you “imagine” a sound,
do you see its source?

If you don’t know a sounds origins,
how do you imagine it then?



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

These words are silent
but they can make us hear.

Firstly they make us hear themselves,
but maybe they can also make us hear
of what they speak?

*A slamming door...
rolling thunder...
a siren....
something tinkling...
metallic...
glassy...
sheering...
glistening...*

Conversely, can we think only in sounds?
Try and think in sounds.
I could help you,
but then maybe you'll be thinking words —
words made of sounds about sounds.



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

Words cannot completely describe a sound,
but they are all that we've got...



Words are for noting
— noticing sound.
An innervoice is note taking.
Listen to the inner voice,
the words noting the sounds,
the sounds of the words
noting the sounds
over the sounds.

We narrate the sounds to ourselves:
a “second-order observation.”

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

When we listen, we are at the
centre.
The sounds are around,
surround us.



When we look, the image is always in front.
We 'imagine' what is behind us.
Listening we are in the middle.

We can also listen into things
Hear the middle of other things
hear something inside something else...

When we look we can't get further
than the outside without breaching a barrier,
breaking the surface.

But this sound ...his sound is around you

Do we listen,
or does our body listen for us,
always in the act,
the present participle

We are listening
as we are being
an always state
of ebbs and flows
a wave
in our consciousness

We are listening.

We are listening to our listening.



Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.

Sound stories

At the beginning of the *Language of Listening* encounter participants are prompted to talk about how they aurally engage with the world, both via what is collectively accepted as 'music' (collections of sounds intentionally placed together to be listened to within the frame of time), and by attending to the immediate environment (organic and inorganic).

These reflections and observations often take the form of anecdotes, memories and stories, and like Laura, one of the RMIT Gallery participants, I love to listen to stories. I particularly love to listen to stories about listening.

I thank the participants for their stories and allowing me to share them in this format.

The Lock-Up Gallery 2018

Newcastle, NSW

Soundtrack of your life

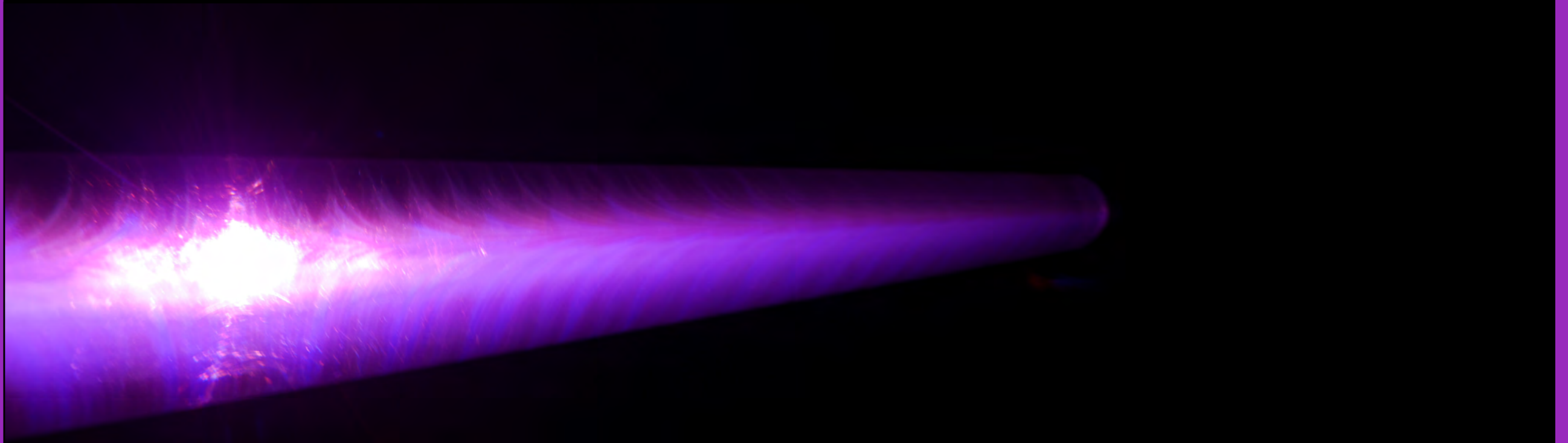
Inside listening

Easy rider in the city quiet

Inner landscapes

Psycho-physical negotiations

Machine mediations & mediations



Soundtrack of your life

Working listening

I'm a journalist—I do radio as well as print—so I listen to transcriptions, I'm on air listening to people, and listening to music and responding.

If I'm working at home I have music on low, just as background, just quietly. Music gives me company. It can be a grind. I know I'm confined to my desk but I just want some little bit of relief.

I can't listen to anything when I'm doing something fairly intense. I need to be quiet. I don't like a lot of clashing noises. So if I've got my kids talking at me, the radio on and the TV is on I just can't handle it anymore. It bombards me, agitates me.

Ambient listening

When I am working I am able to zone out, but when I'm outside, I pick up sound. If I don't have any other distractions, I'll pick up the corellas flying over, or I think "there are magpies or there's building work up the road." I pick up dialogue a lot. I think that's from being a journalist. I tune in to conversations all the time. I hear things

that people say and I hear some extraordinary conversations. I can't help that. Once I'm plugged in I find it very hard to let go because I'm curious.

I'm more visual. I'm a visual person and I write visually. It's what I've seen that informs what I write, not what I heard. I just have to write one or two words to take me back visually to that place. If I'm doing some travel writing, I don't need much of a reminder. The key to writing well is to use the five senses but I'm definitely visual more than aural.

Listening memories

My memories are often more song related, music related. With a song I can be instantly taken back to a moment or a place—I might have been travelling—but not so much a particular sound. Like if I hear 'Wonderwall' [Oasis, 1995] it takes me back to a trip I did with a girlfriend in Turkey and singing that song with these Turkish guys because it was the only song we both knew all the lyrics to. I hear that now and I just sing it. It makes me sing. I can't not sing that song.

(Rosemarie 3/2/2018)

Inside listening

Recently I've set up a record player at home and I just like listening to sounds that aren't the music—the thumps—the music in that. But I haven't been listening to much music recently. I just like silence. It's not silence—that distant hum disappears at times—listening to the birds, the sounds of trees, leaves.

Until recently I was living in south western Sydney. It was quite quiet there. There were times when I felt like I was in the middle of the bush. Newcastle is a lot louder. Because I'm quite close to the city there's a constant—I don't notice it all the time—but there's just constant sound going on.

When you listen do you get images?

Often sensations, and then images, and then memories as well. A mixture. It depends what [the sounds] are. I think if they're familiar then more memories. The more unfamiliar then it's more physical. Trying to recreate it internally to understand—it's almost empathetic.
(Georgie 3/2/2018)

Easy rider in the city quiet

Where I listen to music is mainly on my motorbike. That's my place to listen because that's where I've got control over the music. At home my wife has control over the music and in the workplace we don't get the opportunity much. So on my motorbike is where I'm on my own. I set up a system myself. I just got some headphones, cut the top off them and fitted the earpieces inside the spaces in the [helmet]. Then I've got my iPod.

It's funny that everyone always thinks it's really dangerous to listen to music on a motorbike and I think 'why is it any more dangerous than in a car.' You can still hear other things, because you control the volume. And the sound of the motorbike—you leave it behind. You're moving away from it. If you ride bikes you realise that. Your noise is annoying someone else because you're moving away from it. I find if I haven't got my music, because my battery goes dead or something, my ride is not the same. It's very unenjoyable. It's got that down feel to it.

Natural noise

I used to live out in the bush and—it might sound weird—but bush sounds are distracting and noisy. The bush is extremely, deafeningly loud! So I used to really look forward to our city breaks—we go to Melbourne quite often to spend the weekend—and I'd sleep so well because you've got that background drone of traffic. It's the white noise. Now we've moved in to Newcastle—we've been here six years—I sleep so well. I tell people it's so quiet now that we live in the city. No cows mooing, and we haven't got frogs croaking all the time. There are no cicadas.

Cicadas are just deafening. Frogs! We used to have so many frogs at our place and they used to go all night. With a cicada you get the up and down, the oscillation. Frogs are even more annoying because they just suddenly make the noise and you're lying there waiting for the next one. It's like a six second break, then it's a ten second break, then an eight second. It's irregular and you're just lying there waiting for it. And you're like: "God! shut up!" And then cows will start.

I've found as I've gotten older—I love music—but what I've found is that now I like to have silence. I turn the radios off, turn the TV off and just have nothing. I really enjoy no sound.

Machine music

I think I like technology-induced sound. I used to work in factories and I like machinery. I like machines and I like hammers so I think I just like man-induced noise. When I was 16 I left school and worked in factories and did so until I was 40. And it was always loud but I never found that sort of noise annoying. I always enjoyed the lathes and the big machines. There were always rhythms and tones—you get a lot of deep bass tones—and those electronic tones. I just like those sort of industrial noises, which is why I think I like city noises as opposed to nature noises.

(Rob 3/2/2018)

Inner landscapes

A lot of my artwork is based around music—a response to music I suppose...I always like to have a bit of background music here and there because it keeps me from getting caught up in my own thoughts, caught in cycles. The music varies, the other day it was John Cage, today it's Fleetwood Mac.

I went to White Rabbit Gallery last week and there was an installation—lights going up and down—and it was like a choreographed installation to John Cage's music. I think it was called 'In A Landscape' (1948). It was just so beautiful, it put you in the moment, allowed you to appreciate the beauty of it. And so I went home and I put it on. Through lectures I've heard about John Cage and watched documentaries and things, but I've never really sat and listened. And it was so beautiful.

With some of my research I'm working with dreams and mindfulness, consciousness and sub-consciousness. I'm not a scientist so I don't understand everything, but I do workshops—to stop and listen. Sometimes I become aware of something—I'm just working on my computer and all of a sudden I hear the birds outside—and they start to resonate very clearly. Then I stop and take that in. Even listening to the tinnitus in your ears, when I become aware of that, I start to feel like they sound like cicadas—when you hear cicadas outside and they get very very loud—that's what happens with the ringing in your ears as well.

Memory senses

Funny how sound connects you to memory. That's what I look at in my research. Those triggers that make me have those feelings of mindfulness. Like touching. Using all your senses to create, to connect and stay grounded.

But I think I'm more visual. I'll have triggers where I might hear a sound and it will take me back to a memory or a dream. I have a lot of very clear dreams that I'm researching at the moment and I might hear someone talk or hear a song and it will take me to a place.

Actually I go to places with some of my friends who are ghost hunters, and I'll be in an [abandoned] place and I can hear kids laughing. I'm a bit sceptical about ghosts but I look at it like it could be my brain thinking of a memory connected with the way the building looks.

(Sharon 3/2/2018)

Psycho-physical negotiations

Yes I listen to music. In what context? That varies. Sometimes to lighten up my environment—to diffuse neighbourly impact to be honest. It's very much my immediate environment that I need to add something to because I find other input too negative. To create a certain ambiance. To dance, to have fun, to cry—if I feel like I need to cry I put on particular music.

I don't have particular songs I use. I'm very intuitive and just see what comes up. I can't really work to music, and by work I mean creative stuff—except one person, one sound work, which is music. I find it's the first time I've discovered something that I can be creative with.

There's something in that particular sound work that resonates with what I am doing so it opens up the space, it holds the space, that I want to create for myself. And it doesn't dictate anything. It leaves me alone in a way. You know yesterday when you were talking about music where you know what's going to happen—it's not the case with this—it does its thing. It has a richness to it that I like, but it's subtle.

I have really bad tinnitus and I have hypersensitive hearing, so whatever I listen to is very much where I'm at at that point of time in terms of that. Even though there are occasionally sounds [in the sound piece I'm talking about] that have that pitch to it, it does allow me to accept my tinnitus differently. It's a type of sound that can speak to it. Whereas classical music or something like that, that doesn't go together.

I'm very aware of tinnitus being like a key as to what's going on. So it varies a lot, and I get it sometimes in both ears, sometimes it's different pitches, sometimes it's clicking sound. It is music...

Do you sometimes listen in a concentrated way to the natural or unnatural environment?

Very much. Because it's part of my alive environment and my aliveness—responding or noticing being with something. I guess the hypersensitivity that I have, aside from the tinnitus, creates an interesting space for me because on one level I want to shut [sound] out. I'm very quickly overwhelmed by sound and noise, and on another level when I don't shut it out, I zoom into it very consciously. I'm not just in the middle somewhere. I'm somebody who very much engages with where I am physically as well. So what's around me and what has input, I'm generally very open to it.

Back to my neighbour situation which is interesting because it's part of that domestic lived realm—I have neighbours and they make horrible sounds. I have this really intense soundscape around me but I have these beautiful birds as well, so I'm very aware that I have to listen to the whole spectrum because if I only focus on one I get upset.

I think the brain is so conditioned to focus on the things that—how to put it—that traumatise us the most. And I make a very conscious effort to go “OK no there are birds as well, there's not just that.” I always think of cooking and spices, it's a mixture of whole lot of things.

(Karin 4/2/2018)

Machine mediations & meditations

I listen to music at home. I listen to music in the car. I use music in my work. These days primarily digital. I do have a lot of vinyl. I listen to it occasionally, only because some of the vinyl is really difficult to get digital versions of. I keep wanting to buy one of those machines that digitises vinyl. But there's something about [click noise]. I do like the flip of the vinyl experience. By the same token I do like being able to put the iPod on shuffle. I sometimes try and work out what are its algorithms, because it clearly gets on an acoustic bent, or on a classical bent and you just go "What's going on?"

I like listening to both music and the world around me. The Hunter Writers Centre office used to be the end office here [in the old Police Station building] and we used to do things like leave the computers on overnight and put on voice recognition to see what we'd get. And we would—we'd get text the next morning. It was just the ambient noise, and the ambient noise here is really interesting. I don't know if the corridor outside is still the major urinal...the number of times you'd hear people in the corridor down there.

I live on the periphery of Newcastle—not so much the periphery anymore. You know when you drive back you see Sugar Loaf Mountain, I live pretty much at the foot of that and often go for wanders in the bush there. I take my grandkids with me and I say "Lets just sit and listen."

When I'm with kids, I want them to start to listen and identify things. When I'm just sitting on the ridge watching the sunset, it's not conscious but I'm very aware of the wind, the trees and I'll note a sound in the bush. If it's sunset often the wallabies are out. You'll hear that lovely thump as they move.

I've lived by the coast a lot and I am a surfer. And I remember when I lived in Darlinghurst thinking the traffic sounded like the surf. Now unfortunately the surf always sounds like the traffic. I mean I can distinguish but that background peripheral thing is always there. I always found the sound of the sea really nice and reassuring.

Tropical terror

The kids really wanted fish when they were young but I really got sick of the tropical fish tank. There was never silence in the night, the machine was always on. And while it was very relaxing in the day to sit and watch, you woke up at two or three in the morning and there was this sound in the house. "Ah damn. I wonder if they can survive to til the morning if I turn it off." And I did sometimes and they did obviously survive. We got fish because they were peaceful to look at—that meditative thing— but the sound of the tropical pump really annoyed me. It was just that silence in the house was taken away and I like silence in a house—which doesn't exist obviously—but I like that sense that there is no sound and then a sound comes. I live in a timber house, and it speaks, it creaks all the time.

Mixed memories

I have sound in memories, more often than not I have smells, that's standard. But I have a smell and sound that almost goes together. My Dad was a barber, and the first job I had, I was 13, was sweeping the hair and brushing, putting the coats on for people in his shop. And I always remember the snip snip snip... snip... snip snip... snip snip snip and the smell of sterilising jars. That was my disappointment with the Barber Shop Chronicles a couple weeks ago. There was no smell to it. He always dropped things in the sterilising jars—these cloudy jars. The snip of scissors is really distinct. I've still got his scissors and sometimes I take them out and just play with the noise. That snip of scissors is a distinct memory for me of that shop, of him. (Brian 4/2/2018)

Listening notes

The *Language of Listening* encounter involves a concert-for-one, in which a set of sounds are played to the participant who is invited to discuss them: what they think they are hearing; if it makes them see things; remember things; how the sounds make them feel.

The first set of sounds are field recordings ranging from the domestic to environmental. These encourage a propensity to think about the source of the sound—the figure, as I term it. However rather than emulating a “mystery sounds” guessing game format, the participants are encouraged to explore descriptive language beyond the simple naming of the source.

The second set of sounds are purely electronic and are, to some ears, agitating noise. To other participants they are quite pleasing and stimulating. With the origin of the sound much harder to pinpoint these sounds elicit a more abstract set of descriptions and some fascinating observations.

The arrangement and collections of sounds differ slightly (some the same, some new additions) between the interview sessions undertaken at each venue. They are presented both as separate sounds and responses, as well as accumulated soundscapes with more extensive comments.

The Lock-Up Gallery

Newcastle, NSW

Figurative sound

Sound 1

Sound 2

Sound 3

Sound 4

Sound 5

Sound 6

Soundscape

Non- Figurative sound

Soundscape



I hear searing. That burning sound, I was thinking burning, getting burnt. It's just that sound. it's so hot, it's a boiling sound. (Rosemarie)

It feels like my stomach, like all down my oesophagus —"cccchhhhhrrrr"—is closing off and opening. It makes me feel nauseous, but I think it's a coffee sound. It's weird, it's twisting down into my gut. (Georgie)

It could be a couple of things. To me that sounds like champagne going into a glass. Or foam—squirty foam. Or possibly a frying egg. All of those things I like. It's got a foam quality to it. (Rob)

At first I thought it was someone snoring and then it turns into the sound of someone pouring coffee...That very first bit is dry, like a drawing in... I suppose in a way you're drawing in the sound and then it pours out like the coffee. I can't read as well as I used to because now I'd rather 3D-see something. So that, in my mind, is a person breathing in snoring and then the coffee pouring out. I can actually see the colour of the coffee—it's black coffee. (Sharon)

Heat, someone manually manipulating a degree of something. In fact the first thing I saw was gas—a gas oven—and I thought, well it doesn't quite sound like gas but it has to do with a gas oven heat, the flames. It's interesting, I didn't think of the water, or the liquid. (Karin)

It provokes an olfactory response for me, which is coffee. I'm a tea drinker but I brew coffee for people in the morning. But it has that sense of percolation in it.

[On being told it's boiling water poured into a teapot], it sounds much more like the assertiveness of the percolator. There's something slower about tea. Is it aerated? Is that what it is. If one thinks of physics, that's what it is. The molecules are moving faster. (Brian)

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.



Is that coffee? The bubbles are trapped.
They're not fully realised. (Sharon)

That one's very gentle. It's just sitting below
the top of something and coming up but it's not going to burst.
It's simmering. It's not heading towards a climax. (Georgie)

It sounds like an old fashioned coffee percolator. Which is a
great sound because I love coffee. But that reminds me of my
Nan because it's like that really old fashioned [pot], with the
glass on the top. I've got a little stove top percolator—that sort
of hexagonal-shaped silver one—but mine doesn't make this
noise. Again it's got that nice—I'd call it a foam quality. Its got a
"mouth feel." I get it on the side of tongue, because it's like
that champagne bubble—coffee bubble —it's that mouth feel.
(Rob)

Ah that sound reminds me of horses—but it's not horses. The
galloping, clopping sound...And there are birds in there in the
background. I feel like it's chesty—you know when people have
asthma or bronchitis and they get that sort of feeling. I know
that's not what it is, it just reminds me in a way. I feel like I'm in
a tropical forest somewhere with a lot of canopy and it's dark.
You can hear your heartbeat—you can hear your internal self...I
guess if I had a coffee right now I'd be day-dreaming about
being in those places where you switch off. (Sharon)

When is it over!...It's got rhythm to it. I almost hear the
galloping of horses or something like that. I want to associate
volume with it...a pot or something to take that it in. But then it
sounds too continuous for it to be filled. Pressure... (Karin)

You want to identify, I'm trying not to identify. It sounds like
boiling water. But it really has a sense of constructing distance
—space. The sound is close but it feels like it's happening in a
larger space and creates space for me. There's an echo in it. I
use sound often to orient myself in space. How it affects the
space I feel I'm in, that's what I mean. The other one felt like a
smaller space, this one feels like more of an expansive space,
with the level of echo to it. If I take away what the concrete
thing is or meaning, this is cavernous. Maybe it's the deeper
pitch. (Brian)



That's a really beautiful sound. It's gentle
and calming. And it looks pretty. It looks
silvery. I could listen to that one all day. It
feels like I'm swimming in it. I'm thirsty.
(Georgie)

That's like a distant trickling. I feel like I'm in a dark room
somewhere. There's just the sound in a dark, dark room like a
cavern somewhere. Like a distant memory, like when you have
a dream and you feel like it's night time. The echoing... (Sharon)

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.



I keep picturing outside. I don't picture inside. Like water, a creek or...That's a amazing. It's like glass—clean, clear. But there's also the 'te te te te te te te' like really fast rain—when you hear it on glass—a high frequency. (Rosemarie)

That sounds unwell—sounds like it's having trouble. It's broken. Is it a water filter? I find it a bit unnerving. Something's not quite right. Will it run out? (Georgie)



That almost sounds electrical, like pulsing electricity. [On being informed it's ice melting] Ice can scream...there's a novel [All My Puny Sorrows by Miriam Toews (2014)] that I was reading, set in Canada and the character lives near a frozen lake in Winnipeg. She hears the screaming of the ice at night, and it sounds like a woman being murdered. (Rosemarie)

Sounds like one of those annoying insects that used to live by my place. I have no idea what that is but it just sounds like an annoying insect. [On being informed it's ice melting], it could almost be a whale. (Rob)

That sounds like a can of Coke that's been opened and left for a while, and then you hold the can up to your ear. I don't know if you've done that. I used to do it when I was a kid, because it was cold and it would cool your ears down. You hold it against your ear and it makes that tiny, tiny pinging sound. (Rob)

I could listen to that for ages. I find that really relaxing, that's really nice. It's just gorgeous. I take it that there's heat in it, is there? There's a temperature thing. It's just a lovely sound. Wow, it's bouncing off the glass isn't it. That sharp edge. (Brian)

It's quite beautiful after a while. You learn to trust that it's not changing—that it's constant. It makes me want to look at it more. Or crickets in the bush in the evening. [On being informed it's ice melting/dying], it's suffering. Does it sound like that in Antarctica? It's still gentle though, even though it's being destroyed. It's a calm death. It's the pitch. It's not varying very much is it? (Georgie)

I still feel like there's birds in there—quiet little birds talking to each other. [On being informed it's ice melting], it's very soft, like it's singing. (Sharon)

I feel like I've heard that sound before, like a spark, an electric spark on something. It's very soft and cute. (Sharon)

Electricity... sparkiness, something sparky about it... but then again, to point out the obvious, water dripping on something—metal. [On being told it's mineral water] Mineral water for me has a metallicness, something of the flavour of metal. Whilst I work in the visual field I do feel like there's a crossover [with other senses]. (Karin)

I just had an immediate sense of being in a completely different landscape, geographically. Open, vast, cold, but then that other stuff keeps going. [On being told it's ice cubes melting], I would never literally have come to that conclusion, but it was associative. (Karin)

I'm assuming this is natural sound but for me it's—I listen to a lot of people who play with sine waves—but I'm assuming it's a natural sound. (Brian)

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.



Sounds like something cooking at a low heat in butter, like an egg.
(Rosemarie)

No I don't like [the ASMR sensation]. It controls me and I don't know when it's going to happen. I've not investigated what sets it off. This is yucky. What's going on here? It's like cockroaches. (Georgie)

Sounds like popping candy in your mouth. (Rob)

That's sort of behind me—scrunching of peanut shells or something, cracking... sometimes when you hear the crackle of flames in fire, cracking eggs, cracking shells... It's gentle though. I feel like something's cooking in a frypan, like when something's sizzling in a frying pan.
(Sharon)

I did get that sensation [skin tingling] before with the ice. I'm very aware of my neurological stuff. I can feel it. It's interesting you mention that about the sensations and the texture—because ironically that was absent in my life, the ability to really experience nuance and to connect to it. But it is something I really nurture. (Karin)

I do listen to stuff like this—those Japanese artists, Taylor Dupree etc. I listen to all that sort of stuff. Even driving I'll put that on and it makes the motorway slightly more habitable, if I don't want a beat to get me there. I've never experienced it [ASMR tingling effect]. This is close. It's very beautiful. (Brian)



*Accumulated figurative soundscape**

There's a curiosity around it, but I'm not analysing it either. I can sort of pick up the different layers but I'm not really thinking about what each is. Because you said it was inside, I'm automatically thinking kitchen. So this to me is like dinner time cooking, all the different sounds going on, something's frying, something's boiling, that juggling act of keeping a meal on track.

That sounds like a storm and rain. That ping... That just reminds me of now—summer—that build up. And that relief that comes: "thank goodness it's raining." I've got a tin roof so I love that sound. The first thing you think of is "is that hail?" Those first few heavy fat drops can instantly sound like hail on tin. The drops can be really fat. And then I think of my dogs. They don't like storms so they're going to be where I am. And my kids are really terrified of thunder and lightening. It just knocks off the enjoyment. I'm happy in that state, but the dogs and the kids aren't.
(Rosemarie)

It's a bit like a horror film. The layering—building up—there's a tension. It's like the start of a movie.

Is there music in there, or it just sounds? It really softened that tension that was building. I'm relaxed now. There's a sound that's a bit like something burning. It gives it a beat but a mixed-up sort of beat.

It's just like sitting at home. It's very calming now. There's no TV, there's nothing to interrupt, just the sounds around and zoning into them. Sitting there, listening to them. It's like before going to sleep. There's nothing to interrupt it. You could market this—because people miss the rain so much. (Georgie)

** This soundscape is compiled live for each interviewee so timings may have varied.*

Please note: Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.



I can hear a clock ticking...If that low sound was a lot louder it would sound like a tent in the wind... That clock ticking is driving me nuts. I couldn't be in a room with a clock like that.

That sounds like some New Age music—that music they put on when you go to a hypnotherapist. It's the twang of some crazy guitar—the type of thing that's meant to relax you but instead makes me so tense. It has the completely opposite effect on me. Storm. And a crackling fire. Rain on a tin roof....

Are you getting images?

Certainly of the storm and the tin roof, because we used to live out in the bush so that was a regular sound and it was nice. We used to really enjoy that. It was very dry where we lived. We used to like the lightening and the rain. Because that was good, it meant our water tanks were going to get filled. So that's a really nice sound. A good sound. It's a specific image. I can shut my eyes and know exactly what I'm looking out on. I can see the view from the veranda. And the smell—I get the smell. (Rob)

Sounds like when I'm on the train and we go through the tunnels and it starts to become enclosed and you can hear—I suppose it's the reverberation off the walls. There's a guitar or something strumming, leading up to an orchestrated performance. Thunder. I feel like I'm in a cabin in front of fire, listening to thunder and rain on a tin roof. I can see the fire and I'm looking out of the window—the fireplace there and the window there—looking out over the ocean but it's an imagined place.

I do go and sit at the beach when I need to ground myself and sometimes we do go there when it is thundering. I like being in the city, in Sydney, when it's that sort of rain. There's some sort of a different atmosphere—I think it takes the negative energy away.

I love the sound of rain on a tin roof. It's very relaxing, I almost feel like I want to go out, out that window, like french doors and go and put my hands in the rain and feel the rain. I never carry an umbrella, I always like to have the rain on me. And that little twang in the background. (Sharon)

That's really working on my brain. It reminds me a little bit of New Age sounds. I did a workshop once and there was an American guy who would record sounds from outer space and in the ocean and then he would compile them—very much neurologically focused sounds. It reminds me a little bit of that. It's an opening up. It's pleasurable. It doesn't put me in suspense so I can listen, I can let it happen. I can literally feel my brain doing this sort of—[hand motions]—feeling it. Sorry I'm a bit lost for words here because it's so physical. But it's sort of about opening a relationship—opening up a conversation, so it's not just a conversation anymore. (Karin)

I love this sort of stuff, because although it's ambient, or whatever people want to call it, in actual fact I find it focuses—because I want to pay attention to it. I want to hear all the things that start to layer. I know the principle of ambient is a sound track we're not supposed to notice, but I've never understood that. That's lovely. I live with a tin roof. This is intensely domestic for me. (Brian)

** This soundscape is compiled live for each interviewee so timings may have varied. Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.*

*



*Non-figurative soundscape**

I could picture things straight away. I pictured an anxious scene in a movie. Someone on the run. The music doesn't have to have a narrative because it's just trying to reinforce a tone or emotional state. I could picture someone anxious—the heartbeat—that sort of adrenalin. And then the other sounds were just to give it atmosphere.

I suppose I was picturing a city. It would work just as effectively if they were in a field running, because to me, without words being spoken, it was the reflection of an internal state.

There was a man and he was looking around, moving between buildings. It was wet and it was dark. And that was probably because it sounded a bit like rain, that fuzzy sound. I wasn't picturing whether it was 1800 or the future, but I could just see this emotional state. The man being very wary, looking around, suspicious, worried... anxiety and panic and the urge to run. I'm not saying he was running, just when you feel that compulsion to run

I'm very conscious, when I watch a movie, of the music and sometimes that agitates me because I don't want so much. I just think: "Pull back, pull back. You don't need it." But that sound could be something in the background that could cue you to that emotional state, without him having to be melodramatic. I picture it as a low key state really. I'm not sure why it was a man... (Rosemarie)

At the start I felt very sad suddenly and my chest was tightening and I had to work to breath. And I got sadder and sadder. Then I sat amongst it and I got comfortable with it and accepted it. It was like being a very long way away and just observing and being unable to change it or to touch it to understand it. Almost like dying. Being physically very unwell and just observing and not being able to mentally understand. The tone at the start felt really intense. And then it lifted. It was like it was just pouring down...

It's just that there was nothing out [there]—it was all [here.] It was quite intense. There was with nothing to break it up.

I wasn't searching [for the source of the sound] at all. There was something sad in it for me in that it made me more aware of things that I'm not aware of. That there's so much I'm not aware of and I'm missing it all the time. Not a longing... I don't know... (Georgie)

It sounds like Morse Code. I liked the sounds right at the beginning. I like electronic music so it sounded very much like a new Thom York track or something. This is sounding more like Radiohead every minute. It's good. Now it sounds like Aphex Twin... I like that kind of music. (Rob)

** This soundscape is compiled live for each interviewee so timings may have varied. Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.*



It feels really heavy. Now that feels heavier—like double. That’s piercing... There’s that other little part coming into it. The little tapping reminds me of Morse Code.

I like it. I don’t think I could listen to it for too long but I can hear the beat, there’s that constant in the background. When you’re listening to music you have your background with the drums and then you have the other instruments over the top. I think I’ve taught myself to try and listen to both and then find a beat, and then follow it so that it’s not so disconnected.

That feels like water coming in—a waterfall, a loud waterfall like when you’re at Niagara Falls. I like the sound of a waterfall. Sound puts you in a place if you can’t be there physically.

That’s a bit harsh, like someone’s trying to tune in a radio and there’s white noise—and now it’s stopped.

Those sounds are bearable. I find it hard listening to jazz sometimes, because it’s very disconnected. [I try to listen for] something that creates a balance—harmony—I’m trying to find harmony in something. Trying to find that balance and understand it and trying to delete the disconnecting things.

That’s very much how I’m trying to work at the moment. Thinking of memories, finding the positive memories and blending those with what I know now. And sound is very much part of that....We’re listening to the rain [outside] now... (Sharon)

Sound and space really connect for me, be it real sounds in real space or these. That start, it felt like the first drone came from me rather than an external source and then the sounds later on felt like they were external. The first sounds we listened to felt located outside, but I felt located in the midst of this sound and I like that experience—to be literally immersed.

It was more the scratch noises, the static towards the end that felt slightly intrusive for me.

I’m not conscious of any images, I just surrendered to being in it. I tend to operate from that point as much as I can—gut and head. I just surrender to it. A bath—literally immersion. (Brian)

** This soundscape is compiled live for each interviewee so timings may have varied. Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.*



*Non-figurative soundscape**

It was on the edge of being a bit too loud for me but I tried to not let that override me, It was pretty full on actually...Is it still going? Because there was a bird sound and I didn't know where that was from [a currawong outside the window].

First of all I loved that point zero entry because I'm practicing a lot of how to be not in thought. For me that is a very a fascinating space, and the most alive space. So that opening is just out there somewhere in space. No language. I just had a bit of a conception story—that's weird.

Like in a movie format, creating scenario in your head?

No like being it, living it. That sort of open space, the water the sea, the sea meeting the land... But then that sort of clash, or that rupture between water and land. Something about that. Then just a whole lot of stuff—I have to deal with this—I have to deal with that.

There's a lot of information that you have find relationships between.

Yes, exactly. It sort of had parts, that first and then that second and third—navigating and negotiating—that's the only way I can say it. And then that big sound dropped away—"pshew"—and then I could hear a bird... but it was so beautiful because it was pure. Because all I had was space and this one sound—just this bird. I kept thinking I really don't know where that is. It's here, it's here. At the same time it was also in the sound that was very vast and very universal.

What were you seeing when you said you were seeing it?

A visual sense of spaciousness—landscape but not in a particular sense—in more of a universal sense. (Karin)

** This soundscape is compiled live for each interviewee so timings may have varied. Sounds will open in your internet browser. Internet connection required.*

About the artist

Gail Priest is a Sydney/Katoomba-based artist whose practice features sound as the key material of communication and investigation. She has exhibited sound installations and performed electroacoustic compositions nationally and internationally including at ISEA2016, Hong Kong; Werkleitz Festival, Germany; the Sonoretum, Kapelica Gallery, Slovenia; Tokyo Wonder Site, Japan; Artspace, Sydney; and Performance Space, Sydney. She has undertaken several commissions for ABC Radio and released five albums. She is also a curator of concerts and exhibitions, and writes factually and fictively about sound and media arts, in particular for RealTime magazine (2001-2017).

In 2015-2016 Priest was the Australia Council Emerging and Experimental Arts Fellow, developing a body of ficto-critical work exploring what art will sound like in the future. Her upcoming projects explore an 'ideasthesia' of sound and text by developing a hybrid form of 'sound-writing'.

www.gailpriest.net

gailpriest.bandcamp.com

photo Samuel James



Credits

SonoLexic

Concept, text, sound and video by Gail Priest.
Object design and fabrication by Thomas Burless
(tomikeh)

SonoLexic is a an Experimenta and Australian Network
for Art and Technology (ANAT) Commission for
Experimenta Make Sense.

EXPERIMENTA



PRESENTING PARTNER:



EXPERIMENTA MAKE SENSE IS SUPPORTED BY:



EXPERIMENTA GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE SUPPORT OF DANIEL BESEN.

Experimenta Make Sense Tour 2017-2020

RMIT Gallery, Melbourne: 2 Oct - 11 November, 2017

The Lock-Up, Newcastle: 3 Feb – 18 Mar, 2018

UTAS - Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart: 21 Apr - 27 May, 2018

Tweed Regional Gallery And Margaret Olley Art Centre, Tweed Heads:
27 Jul - 23 Sept, 2018

Rockhampton Art Gallery, Rockhampton: 13 Oct - 18 Nov, 2018

Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo: 14 Dec 2018 - 3 Mar, 2019

Latrobe Regional Gallery, Morwell: 6 Apr- 30 Jun, 2019

USC Art Gallery, Sunshine Coast: 7 Jun - 15 Sept, 2019

New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale: 18 Nov 2019 - 9 Feb, 2020

Albury Library Museum: 1 Apr 2020 - 1 May, 2020

Language of Listening (e-publication)

SonoLexic text, sound, images © Gail Priest 2017-2018

Interview texts © the interviewees, used with permission

Image page 8, photo Theresa Harrison

Produced by Gail Priest

Interviewees RMIT Gallery, 6-7 November 2017

Juliana España Keller - www.julianaespanakeller.com

Michael Furner - podcast.abstractparadigms.com.au

Rudolf Keller

Kate Lingard

Jonathan Parsons

Dianne Peacock

Jutta Pryor - vimeo.com/pryorart

Kieran Ruffles - soundcloud.com/ruffles

Laura Scaglione

Jessica Tran

Michelle

Interviewees The Lock-Up Gallery, 3-4 February 2018

Rosemarie Milsom

Georgie Read

Rob Ward

Sharon Williams

Karin Lettau

Brian Joyce