Performance Research

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20

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To cite this article: Deirdre Heddon (2010) The Horizon of Sound Soliciting the earwitness, Performance Research, 15:3, 36-42, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2010.527200

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2010.527200

Published online: 29 Oct 2010.

The Horizon of Sound
Soliciting the earwitness

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I am touching sound, being touched by sound.
I am a resonating chamber. My body is attuned.
I tremble.
Behold. Behear.
Sounds travel. They move. They carry. And they spill over the edge, escaping the circumference, breaking the horizon.

[horizon: Origin: 1540–50; < L *horizōn* < Gk *horízōn* (*kýklos*) bounding (circle), equiv. to *horíz(ein)* to bound, limit. The horizon is a border, a boundary, the dividing (or meeting) line between sky and earth.]

SOUNDING PLACE

The multiple relationships between sound and place are sounded out in the compositional works of Graeme Miller. An early piece, *The Sound Observatory* (1992), collaged 'found' sound from thirty points located on an Islamic geometric pattern transposed onto the city of Birmingham. The collected sounds were then played through thirty speakers hung at a site in the centre of the pattern. *Listening Grounds, Lost Acres* (1994) mapped a straight line between Stonehenge and Clearbury Ring with walkers, wearing ear pieces, guided along the seven-mile duration by sounds of voices and music, all related to the specifics of the place. *Feet of Memory, Boots of Nottingham* (1995) created a radio map of and for Nottingham using voices and music, the focus on sound serving to defamiliarize the city. *Reconnaissance* (1998) similarly pulled in contributions from local residents to produce a collective 'musical map' of and for the 1,200-acre Newbury Park in Surrey, with people invited to contribute short musical phrases associated with a specific place in the park. *Periphery* (2007) constructed a map of Paris from thirty-six discarded/found pieces of cassette tapes, gathered from the city's margins (the Boulevard Périphérique). Miller's best known work to date, *Linked* (2003–9), attempts to project a version of place using an oral archive and mixing voices with musical composition. Here too, one is invited to walk and listen.[1]

As these examples show, sound and place are frequently mapped onto each other in Miller's work; indeed, 'found' sound is often used to map place, heightening awareness of the ways in which places are, literally, composed of complex, overlapping and shifting soundscapes – scapes heavy with information. In many of his civic art works, Miller solicits sounds, too, making tangible the links between people, sounds and place; what places and sounds 'are' extends beyond their physical properties. As anthropologist Steven Feld writes:

> soundscapes, no less than landscapes, are not just physical exteriors, spatially surrounding or apart from human activity. Soundscapes are perceived as and interpreted by human actors who attend to them as a way of making their place in and through the world. Soundscapes are invested with significance by those whose bodies and lives resonate with them in social time and space. (2003: 226)

If places carry sounds, then arguably sounds serve to place us; and just as some sounds might render some people displaced, so some sounds

1 For fuller information on these works, and others, see Arts Admin www.artsadmin.co.uk

Performance Research 15(3), pp.36–42 © Taylor & Francis Ltd 2010
DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2010.527200

might be out of place. Sound is a powerful semiotic system that forges an acoustic or 'auditory community' (Garrioch 2003: 14). The sound of a bell in nineteenth-century France, for example, as Alain Corbain has written,

> shaped the habitués of a community or, if you will, its culture of the senses. They served to anchor localism, imparting depth to the desire for rootedness and offering the peace of near, well-defined horizons. (2003: 119)

The particular peal of a bell might signal belonging, or, where the bell is rung as an alarm, the breaching of borders. Corbain also notes that in pre-modern times it was thought that demons were 'horrified by the sound of bells.... Bells were credited with the power to drive away thunder, thunderstorms and tempests, and cleanse the air of every infernal presence' (123). Bells, then, both marked and protected the horizon, the dividing (or meeting) line between sky and earth, between insider and outsider.

Miller's collection of sounds relating place often includes, as in *Linked*, oral histories or autobiographical associations from the everywoman and everyman. The sound of a place refers not only to the referential content of what is spoken but also to the ways of speaking: turns of phrase, particular inflections, accents, rhythms, hesitations, repetitions, omissions. Given the relations forged between 'community' and 'sound', it is relevant that in *Linked* the speaking voice (or the voice that is spoken, through Miller's subsequent compositional strategies) is placed as part of an ensemble, ensuring as a result that it is plural, fragmented, divergent and intertextual. The 'specificity' of the place is, in its turn, shifting, the 'auditory community' never singular or presumed. If what a place 'is' partly depends on what you (over) hear, Miller strategically builds several listening posts that offer diverse, overlapping 'earpoints' (see Myers 2010). Implicit to Miller's work too, then, is the body that hears, for an 'earpoint', like a 'viewpoint', demands that another's body takes its place in the scene. Equal (and indeed necessary) to the speaking body is the listening body; a body that resonates with sound. As Ross Brown reminds us, sound can only be heard when there is a body to feel it and a mind to think it (Brown 2010: 6, 216). Two of Miller's most recent works, *Linked* and *Beheld*, make tangible this embodiedness by drawing attention to the performance of the interpolated body committed to listening.

THE PRESENT LINK

Miller's large-scale work, *Linked*, described as 'a landmark in sound, an invisible art work, a walk' (Miller 2003b), responds to the enforced demolition of 400 homes in the East End of London (including Miller's) for the M11 link road. A weave of oral histories relating to and relating the place are continuously transmitted along the nearly four-mile walk, with transmitters attached to twenty lamp posts en route. When the locale was destroyed, the stories attached to place – which arguably served to make it what it was – were also threatened. By preserving its stories Miller hoped to preserve the place. Sound 'clings or stays in contact with what begets it' (Connor 2005: 157); the sounds of *Linked* aim to conjure the brutally disappeared back into presence and the present. Opened in July 2003, *Linked*'s transmitters are predicted to work for a hundred years, making this an exceptionally long durational work.[2]

I visit *Linked* in the early spring of 2006, picking up my radio receiver from Leyton Library. It is a damp day, cold day; I can see my breath crystallizing in the atmosphere. As a total stranger to this area I am glad of the map marked with a bold red line that shows the '*Linked* Route', which hopefully will lead me from Leyton to Wanstead. As soon as I have my receiver in my hand, I hold it this way and that, mostly stretching high into the air, trying to pick up the spectral sounds travelling on the airwaves. I wish I'd brought my gloves, as within minutes my hands are red raw. Suddenly, the voices begin to talk to me, as if channelled from somewhere

[2] Visiting the website again as I write this article, I learn that a number of the transmitters are currently being repaired, some because of damage from traffic accidents. Others are out of action because of site developments for the 2012 Olympic Games. The flux in transmission serves to remind me that while the transmitters should function for 100 years, the sites on which they are erected will continue to shift, as they have always done. Before the M11 link road was built, 400 houses were located here. Before 400 houses were located here, there were fields and hedges.

else. They are mostly 'thin', shimmering voices, the aural equivalent of coming in and out of focus. I have to listen intently, beyond or through the interference, an interference that is sometimes outside the work (losing the signal, for example) but often within the work (voices overlapping, disappearing, snippets and snatches of conversation). I listen in to stories of memorable incidents from childhood alongside tales of resistance to mass-demolition; I hear descriptions of houses alongside the experience of looking out of your window and seeing huge skips and cranes; I hear a ghost story (told by a voice that itself sounds a little ghostly); I hear a memory of the sound a chainsaw makes when the house next door is being demolished; I hear the sound of the motorway rumbling alongside me, whether I'm near the motorway or not.

When the sounds come through clearly, I stop where I am and listen attentively for longer. I also discover that if I hold my receiver next to metal, the reception is much better. I look out for lamp posts and metal gates and shape my body so that it becomes a tuning fork, bending, stretching, kneeling, standing. I attend to the act and effort of listening, cocking my head, closing my eyes, deciphering sound (see Barthes 1985). I am not the only one to recognize this choreography or performance of listening. Misha Myers admits that she splits the walk into three sections, returning three times in order to complete it; she too holds her receiver to a metal gate, 'like holding a stethoscope to the heart and lungs of this place' (2010: 62). Carl Lavery, meanwhile, writes that *Linked* 'demands a sacrifice, an investment. You have to walk the route. You are obliged to put in the hours. Your feet suffer. You sweat' (2005a: 153). People in the streets notice my act of listening too; as they pass by me I become a performer, observed.

In an interview with Lavery, Miller proposes that the acts of walking and listening transform the spectator into a witness:

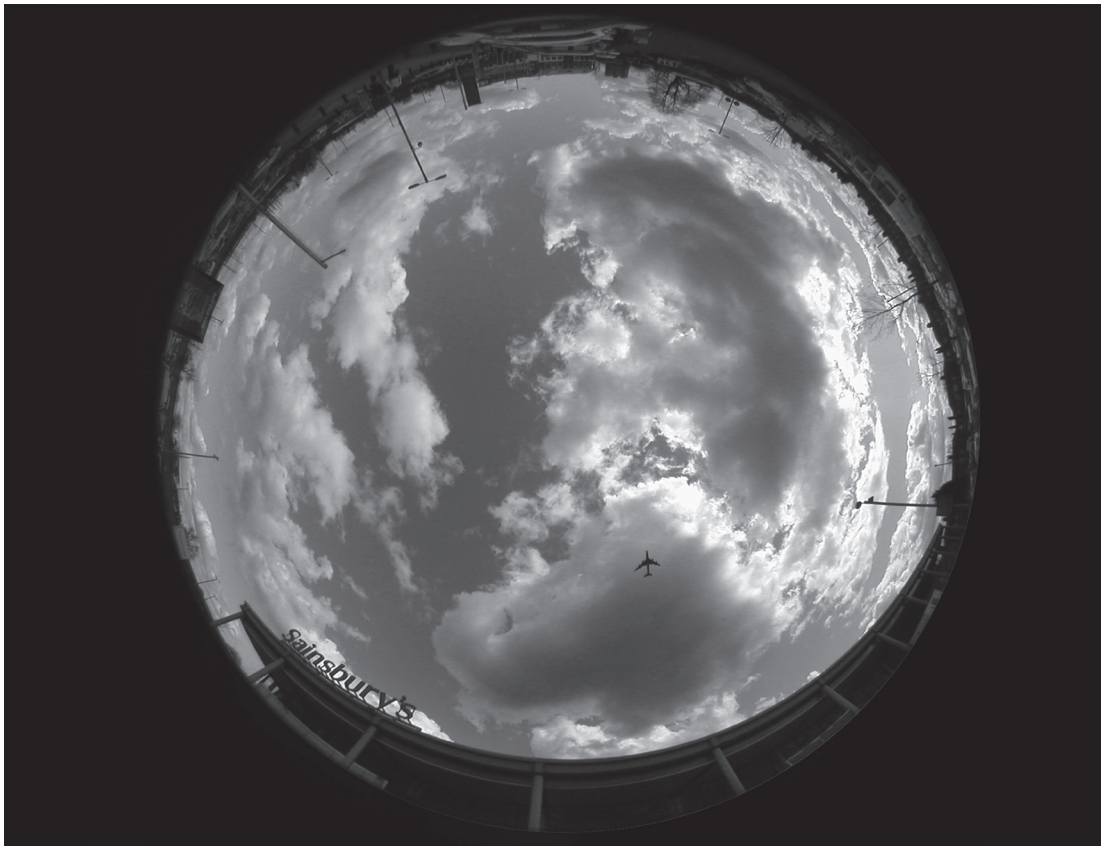
> What happens when you walk and listen is that you start to write your own story. All 'the chaff' disappears. Obviously that leads you back into the past, into memory, into repressed emotions. You are involved. (Miller in Lavery 2005b: 162)

Other links in *Linked*, then, are those that the listener makes with strangers' experiences, the act of listening prompting the weaving of self into the fabric of this landscape. What Miller perhaps signals here is the 'inter-subjective space' that structures listening. As Roland Barthes puts it so evocatively:

> The injunction to listen is the total interpellation of one subject by another: it places above everything else the quasi-physical contact of these subjects (by voice and ear): it creates transference: '*listen to me*' means *touch me, know that I exist.* (1985: 251)

I listen, I am touched by what I hear, you exist.

Though the appeal to listen to *Linked* is not made by a subject in shared time, knowledge of the continuously transmitting voices, strategically recorded using the present tense of past events, does put pressure on the ears. For it is *only* through the act of listening that this physically disappeared place proves to be ultimately indestructible. What *Linked* witnesses, then, is people's continuing willingness to listen to the (absent) other, their continued efforts to render them present. The crucial link in *Linked* is the walker-listener. While the stories, musical compositions and sounds are transmitted 24 hours a day, without a body-as-receiver there is no transmission. Alan Read's observations underline the political potential of *Linked*: 'the more the listeners believe, the more the houses exist, the greater their share of credible presence' (2003: 6). For Read, the essential element is belief; for me, it is listening – but I think we meet in the middle, for what is required here is a committed form of listening. This form of listening, which recognizes the power of listening, puts a useful spin on Steven Connor's remarks about sound: 'How something sounds is literally contingent, depending on what touches or comes into contact with it to generate the sound' (2005: 157). The ghosts of this place need hosts, but hosts who



• **Graeme Miller, *Beheld* (detail: Richmond, UK)**

believe in the presence of ghosts, or at least in the power of their own imagination. As Miller himself writes, he wanted to 'do something that would make those houses reappear', and the trick was to 'get as many people as possible' so as to reach a critical mass 'where somehow you could argue that the houses exist at least as much as the road does – they just exist at a different level – but it tips the balance' (Butler and Miller 2005: 87).

Miller's sound sculpture helps our performance of committed listening by constructing a 'slowed-down' space in which it can take place, an architecture that is like 'a little church on a street corner that filters out the background' (Butler and Miller 2005: 83). While the participant must commit to entering the church, once 'inside' the space repetition, silences and strategic interference prompt what Read rightly refers to as a '*disposition*, an attitude to the charged, human static in the atmosphere' (2003: 5). In this instance I become an earwitness to a site scored with the tracks of insatiable capitalist expansion alongside its impassioned resistance, a resistance that persists through my silent but committed listening.[3]

BEHOLD BEHELD BEHEAR

On 15 April 2008, at the Arches Festival in Glasgow, I behold Miller's interactive installation *Beheld*. The Arches is an arts venue housed in the arches underneath Central Station – arches that hold up that station. The rumble of trains overhead, transporting people across Scotland and further afield, causes the very foundations of this site – and the bodies that inhabit it – to vibrate. In the Arches, you are moved all the time by other people's movements. I will realize, retrospectively, how fitting this is.

My beholding of *Beheld* begins with reading Miller's catalogue note:

> Ten bowls contain images of the sky recorded at sites where stowaways have fallen from aircraft.... BEHELD does not mark the migrant lives lost in no-man's land, nor at sea, in containers or under lorries, nor even the many souls found in undercarriages at airports. BEHELD is not exactly a work of mourning, a *Trauerarbeit*, but more one of geography. Human geography. The horizon is the border that mediates other frontiers – separating races, cultures, individuals, the living from the dead. Those who fell through it fell from common sky into lands of complicated memberships and privacies, hedged on all sides but one. (Miller 2006 n.p.)

[3] For information about walking and listening to 'Linked', see www.linkedm11.net/

Beheld is installed in one of the smallest arches. The darkness of the room is punctured by ten spots of light, each one illuminating a glass bowl set on a square plinth. On the wall, near the archway, a sign advises that the bowls are fragile and should be handled carefully. I approach the first bowl apprehensively, scared that my habitual clumsiness will see it crash to the concrete floor, symbolically smashed into a hundred pieces. Before picking it up, I take a good, long look down at the image projected onto its surface. I see a 360 degree perspective of a piece of sky, with a margin of houses, offices, and land encircling it. In the middle of the expansive sky is the clear, black outline of a plane. I look down at the sky as if I am looking up at it; though I am firmly rooted to the floor, I experience a vertiginous falling down into the sky. My sense of self is already upended.

To behold: to see, to look up, to gaze at, to lay eyes upon, to comprehend. The link between seeing and understanding (or seeing and believing) is strong; at its heart lie assumptions of distance between the seer and the seen, the subject and the object. The space between these is supposedly the space of objectivity, of disembodied knowledge, with seeing a privileged, uncontaminated practice of surveying and ordering from a distance. The symmetry of the ten square plinths reminds me of the grid squares of an ordinance survey map; the glass bowl, holding the projection of space and place, is, in turn, like an all-seeing eye.

I reach out and pick up the bowl, hold it between my two warm hands. The assumed space between subject and object is undone by touch, is filled by touch, by connection, by reaching out. If the eyes were thought of as fingers, then sight as a relation would be self-evident. We would touch with our eyes. Significantly, as I lift up the bowl, my own dark, large shadow is cast across its surface. I am in this picture.

The bowl is much lighter than I had anticipated and smooth to my touch. The texture of this bowl seems to mirror the clearness of the projected image, both surfaces untroubled; I might be holding a bowl of still, reflective water. Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, referencing Renu Bora, notes that the texture of some objects is dense with information 'about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being'. She offers as example 'a brick or a metal work pot that bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making'. In contrast to this deep texture (or, as Bora strategically writes it, 'texxture'), there is another that 'defiantly or even invisibly blocks or refuses such information [... a] texture that signifies the willed erasure of history' (Sedgwick 2003: 14-15). The smooth bowl that I hold and the seamless image contained within, or on, its surface seems to promote this second kind of texture, this erasure of history (a texture that nevertheless, then, signifies).

Beheld, though, does not allow me to forget that at some point a body ruptured this smooth space, punching a hole in and through the sky and earth and the horizon in between. For as I lift the bowl carefully and hold it, I begin to hear – actually, to feel – the sounds of a tolling bell; or the squawk of crows; or cars, shopping trolleys, and distant, chattering voices; or the tinkling, tinny chimes of an ice cream van. These smooth places, despite appearances, are unsettled by sound, as am I. Each bowl literally vibrates with the sound recordings it holds, transmitted through the glass, into my hands. And it is the action of my hands, as I lift the bowl, which activates the sound.

As Miller explains, 'the technicality of *Beheld* is part of its poetry'. Just as the frosted glass bowl's 'translucence and diffusion holds the projected image, so its materiality – its thinness and brittleness – holds the sound'. A transducer – a device that converts one form of energy to another – is attached to the resonant bowl, transforming it into a loud speaker (Miller 2010).

The soundscapes that touch me are sounds of the everyday, matching the visually projected metonymic scenes that point to predictable suburbia or pastoral calm: a white picket fence, a doll abandoned on grass, thickets of trees, road signs, neat houses, telephone wires, street lights.

In most soundscapes, a keynote: the sound of a plane overhead, vibrating through my hands. But this too is now an everyday sound. Like the projected landscapes these are sonic geographies of the ordinary. No sound is out of (my) place. The sounds of the quotidian in these sites are almost unbearable; the pronounced absence of bone-crushing impact deafening.

Phenomenologist Don Ihde reminds us that 'sound is round' ('and I am in the middle'); if sound is round, 'it must have a boundary, a horizon, no matter how indefinite and hard to locate. Where does Sound "end"? What is the horizon of sound?' For Ihde, the 'horizon of sound is silence' (1973: 75). The horizon of this sound, though, mirrored in the horizon of/in the round bowl, is extended through my contact. I am touching sound, being touched by sound. Holding (rather than beholding) sound, the sound travels through me. While it is tempting to present these vibrations as the voices of ghosts channelled through me, Miller specifically tells us that *Beheld* is 'not exactly a work of mourning' but 'more one of geography'. Indeed, I am told dates and locations but am given no names of the deceased. Miller resists the paradox of 'fixing' falling bodies in space and time (as if this were the only story attached to these people) by refusing to figure bodies at all. The only body in these bowls that I hold is my own dark shadow. As I hold each bowl in turn, beneath or over or around the sounds of the wind in the trees, the distant peal of bells, the engines of planes, more often than not what I am hearing – what I am feeling – are the kinetic vibrations of geopolitical systems. Located on the edge of these sounds, rather than in the middle, I am inescapably connected to them; as they resonate through me, though, I do come to stand in their centre.

The projected image on the surfaces of the bowls might enact what feminist geographer Doreen Massey recognizes as a problematic 'sphere of a completed horizontality' (Massey 2005: 107), much like a two-dimensional map with a surface that appears fixed and smooth and stops neatly at the edge. The vibrations signal instead a 'sphere of a dynamic simultaneity', the dense, coeval interconnections of relations in space and time. I doubt, though, that when Massey proposed a dynamism of space predicated on its constant disconnection by new arrivals, she envisioned bodies falling from the sky; the horizontal shattered by the vertical. As Miller notes in his programme, these sites that I hold are meeting places, 'the landing of one narrative into another'. Despite appearances, then, these are not smooth surfaces but are scored with historical, political and economic relations; relations given 'texxture' through the texturing effect of sound heard through my fingers (in Bora's terms, a texture dense with information; see Sedgwick 2003: 14–15). I am unsettled and moved. Behold. Behear. Be here.

The vibrations, activated by my touch and touching me in turn, serve to transform the apparently static monuments that, in their fixed permanence, risk standing in for – replacing – the work of acknowledging. This vibrating land that I hold and hear, a land that is wounded, moves me in a way that 'is not about "moving on" or about "using" emotions to move away' but is rather a 'form of labour or work' which, in the words of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, 'opens up different kinds of attachments to others, in part through the recognition of this work as work' (Ahmed 2004: 201). The sounds of the landscape that travel through me in waves are like 'good scars' (201), reminding me of what happened here. The 'texxture' of these vibrations, Ahmed's 'lumpy sign on the skin [land]' (202), does not deny the injustice of global inequality but rather signals it.

Such tactile listening, feeling the 'scars' in the landscape, is an example of Adrian Piper's 'Difficult Listening Music' (1996). The projected image of everyday, untroubled land – as if nothing untoward happened here – is one truth; the seemingly fixed horizon of the land another; but both are overwritten by the event of unequal worlds visibly colliding.[4] In Piper's terms, 'Easy Listening is meant to be listened to but it is not meant to be heard' (1996: 175). *Beheld*, by

[4] Such unequal relations are centuries old; however, they are rarely made visible.

contrast, compels me to take my hearing into my own hands and to listen deeply, with what founder and practitioner of Deep Listening practice, Pauline Oliveros, calls a heightened consciousness of sound that expands along a space/time continuum, 'extending receptivity' (2005: 1). The ethics of Deep Listening are clear: 'such expansion means that one is connected to the whole of the environment and beyond' (xxiii). Beholding *Beheld*, I hold the unsettled land, touching and listening intently to the multiple, lapping, overlapping narratives that journey through my fingers (my own included, my place in these storied places). The trains rumble overhead.

EPILOGUE: SUNDAY, 13 MARCH 2010

Intersecting with the time and place of my writing this article, there is a demonstration in Glasgow demanding rights for refugees and asylum seekers. The march is prompted by the triple suicide of the Serykh family, from Russia. A week earlier, they had roped themselves together and jumped from the fifteenth floor of a high-rise block. 'Shout it loud, shout it clear, refugees are welcome here', we shout, over and over. The march is routed by the police through largely empty and desolate streets of Glasgow's North West (an area of deprived housing estates – the frequent destination for asylum seekers). Many of the houses are literally being demolished as we walk through. It is not at all clear whether anyone can hear or is listening. Who will carry our voices beyond this horizon?

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